

Actions Count

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

It is easy to beat up on any kind of human activity, as indeed I often do. Humans often mess up, intentionally or otherwise, almost anything they get their hands on or invent. It is true that there are also those, if fewer, who seem able to elevate things, but it is easy to focus on the negative. Newspapers will write about, "Youth pushes old lady off a bus", but never, "Youth helps old lady onto a bus."

Casual readers of mine may get a distorted view of my outlook on life if they only pick up a critical piece, so here's a contrast. (Although I'm just as conscious that casual readers may also come to the conclusion that I'm just another preachy rabbi.)

We in the Christian West (now there's an old fashioned and unfashionable expression!) tend to look at religions as collections of theological imperatives. Presidential candidates are asked about their beliefs. It's natural that Judaism has come to be influenced by the world in which it exists, but if you look at our primary texts you will notice that theology hardly features. This does not mean there are no beliefs, just that the way we relate to them differs from the theological Christian approach and we do, for better or worse, put much greater emphasis on behavior, on actions, rather than thoughts.

The Mishna and then the Gemara (which together make up the Talmud) are the primary texts of the Judaism we see around us today. They were written and compiled during the first half of the first millennium, though of course their roots lie much earlier. They give us a flavor of how the religion was perceived by its leaders during this period, and it is clear that they were very consciously not interested in looking at the world through Greek, Roman, and then Christian, eyes, or in using the tools those societies used to explain their religion and its ideas. Of course from Philo of Alexandria through Saadya of Iraq to Maimonides of Egypt, some very significant Jews did indeed indulge in speculative theology. But there is no theology as such in the Talmud. It does deal with ideas but not in a philosophical way. The texts I want to share with you are emblematic. This is how the Mishna opens, its very first words, which are intended to put down a marker of what really matters in Judaism.

This first Mishna in Peah: "These are the things that have no limitation—Peah (how much you leave for the poor from your fields at harvest time), First Fruits (how much you bring to the Temple), Appearance (how much you bring to Jerusalem when you appear at the Temple each year), Gemilut Chessed (being kind to others), and Torah study." It seems pretty clear that this is a text based on sometime before the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem in 70CE, though no doubt there are plenty of people who will dispute this and claim it is much later and just nostalgic.

The post-destruction modification continues like this: "These are the things that a person 'eats the fruit of' in this world, but the real benefit is in the World to Come—honoring parents, kindness, making peace between people, and Torah study, which is the most important of all." This latter is on the assumption that study leads to practice as well (Megilla 27a), but it also reflects the rabbinic emphasis on Torah study, both to compensate for the loss of sacrifices and as a way of maintaining cohesion and tradition in scattered exile.

Then sometime around the first millennium, when the prayerbook we have today was largely compiled, a third variation comes in which adds the following (and there are minor variations in different prayer books): "Getting early to the Beit Midrash (where they both studied and prayed) in the morning and in the evening, welcoming guests, visiting the sick, helping brides get married, participating in funerals, concentrated prayer, making peace between people and between a man and his wife. But studying Torah is as important as all of them."

(Incidentally, "The World to Come" is used in different ways throughout the Talmud. In addition to meaning "Life After Death", it sometimes refers to a "Messianic Era", and could also be used as the equivalent of what we might call nowadays a "spiritual world" as opposed to the material.)

Look at that list, the priorities. Look at how important being nice to people is. Surely those things matter far more than "believing" the right thing, the accepted thing, or the conventional thing. Though of course it's easy enough to say "I believe", not argue, and get on with your meal. This Mishna is to be found in every prayer book and forms an integral part of the daily service. On the other hand, Maimonides 13 Principles are tagged on at the end as a sort of optional extra. There are many different ways of believing, as many as there are human minds. But there is only one way of behaving in a caring way and we can all recognize that.

This was inspired by an incident in the USA a few weeks ago. There was a bad crash on the route between Brooklyn, New York and Lakewood, New Jersey. They are two of the most important focal points of Orthodoxy in the Jewish world today. The connection route carries more sheitels and beards per kilometer than almost any other. The crash happened on a Friday afternoon, which, together with rush hour traffic, meant that large numbers of Orthodox families found themselves stranded on the highway with no chance of making it to their destinations before Shabbat set in. Thanks to mobile technology, emergency arrangements were made along and off the route. Large numbers of Jewish families at the very last minute put up stranded strangers, often with very different customs and traditions, and gave them somewhere to eat and sleep over Shabbat with absolutely no gain or motive other than kindness, welcoming visitors, helping the needy, Gemilut Chessed.

Now that's what I love about Judaism and what makes me proud of my tradition. It's not the abstractions, or what might, may, or could happen after I die, or even who wrote what—as important as these ideas may be. It's living a life according to Torah that leads one to care and help. Notice that although the Mishna goes on to deal with laws and details, it starts by

stressing the underpinning principle of care for humanity.

Torah study is crucial but it matters most when it leads to action. According to another Mishna, if you do things that others recognize as noble, you can be sure that is what the Almighty wants of you.