



Ask The Rabbi

Researched at Ohr Somayach, Jerusalem

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THOU SHALT LOVE

Faron Lebson from Randallstown, MD
<lebson@gl.umbc.edu> wrote:

Dear Rabbi,

In the Torah, why does G-d command us to love Him? I thought that love was a natural response that could not be demanded of someone?

Dear Faron Lebson,

When we speak of loving G-d, we are not referring to "falling in love" with G-d, as though love, like a pit, were something that you "fall into." Genuine, lasting love comes from respect and appreciation.

That is why, on the whole, we understand this commandment to mean that we should *act* as though we love G-d. We should keep the commandments faithfully, and make personal sacrifices for G-d just as we would towards a child, spouse or parent whom we love.

On a deeper level, though, the Torah is revealing a secret here: Planted within each person is a hidden capacity to truly love G-d. Acting with love towards G-d cultivates this dormant emotion until it grows and shines forth.

The study of the Torah, with its breathtaking depth and beauty, is a prime way to cultivate this love.

Another way to awaken our love for G-d is to study science and nature. Consider, for example, the fact that your stomach is full of acids that are strong enough to dissolve ox leather, yet these very same acids don't melt through the soft flesh of your stomach! This is because the Creator provided you with a specially formulated mucous lining to protect against this. Becoming aware of countless such kindnesses will certainly nurture our innate feelings of thankfulness and love towards G-d.

MY PEGGY

John D. Stone <jstone@nsf.gov> wrote:

Dear Rabbi,

Someone tried to take our dog from our locked and alarmed car in a supermarket parking lot. She escaped and valiantly searched for her home for a week. I was five minutes from getting her at the latest sighting. Before I could get there she was hit and killed by a car. I know my life was blessed greatly by having Peggy as a companion for 61 months. I feel so helpless now, not only that she is gone, but that her last week searching for me was filled with hardship — longing for me and her home, suffering 12 degree (F) nights, snow and rain. She was the epitome of unconditional love, and this has taught me a great deal. Please advise me what will happen to Peggy and will we be reunited eventually?

Dear John D. Stone,

Your sorrow is evident from your message. The Torah commands many laws of mercy and kindness towards animals to nurture this virtuous feeling of compassion. For example, you may not eat a meal before feeding your animal, as this is an act of neglect and cruelty. The Torah also teaches us to have gratitude towards animals

However, animals lack a *neshamah* (a certain level of soul) so they have no afterlife existence. At death their *ruach* (a lower level of soul) expires.

By the great lesson of sincerity which Peggy has taught you, I think she has fulfilled her purpose of creation, if only we could apply this virtue in our own lives toward our fellow humans.

Sources:

- Shemot 22:30 and Rashi
- Ecclesiastes 3:21

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GOING THROUGH THE MOTIONS

Email@Withheld wrote:

Dear Rabbi,

If a Jew observes Torah Law, yet does not believe that there is a G-d or that the Torah is true, do his mitzvot have any value? For example, one born into an observant home who stays observant, but in his heart doesn't accept the Torah as valid.

This is an extreme example, obviously, but your answer may help me understand what my own mitzvot accomplish if I perform them without 100% faith in their necessity. Basically, is "going through the motions" without the inherent belief worth anything? Thank you.

Dear Email@Withheld,

In principle, the fulfillment of a mitzvah requires the belief in G-d, and that He wants us to do the action. The word "mitzvah," commandment, implies a Commander. The real spiritual value of a mitzvah is when it is performed with this understanding. Still there are many reasons to "go through the motions" even though there may be less than 100% belief, and I will try to elaborate briefly as best as I can.

First of all, there are many, many levels of belief, and often even a very low level can produce a lot of benefit, and make mitzvah observance worth something.

Secondly, in terms of negative commandments, the "Thou shalt nots," if he refrains even for the wrong reasons, still he is refraining and not bringing all kinds of negative consequences onto himself.

If there is a basic belief in G-d, just a lack of understanding of the necessity of the mitzvah, then performance with trust in G-d that it is the right thing is really performance on a high level. The very acceptance of *mitzvot* by the Jewish people at Sinai was with the condition "*na'aseh v'nishma*," "we will do and we will understand," meaning that we will do even *before* we understand.

True, a person should try to understand, and certainly an understanding of the background and fullness of the mitzvah will create a deepened satisfaction in mitzvah performance. This usually comes with increased

Torah study. Lack of this understanding, however, does not take away from the fulfillment of the *mitzvot*.

A person in the state that you describe will either go one way or the other. Hopefully, the continued performance of the *mitzvot* will keep him in tune, like the parable of a watch which isn't keeping time: If the person keeps winding it then ultimately when he brings it to a watchmaker there will be something to fix. But if he just lets it sit, it'll get rusty beyond repair.

MEMORIAL FLAMES

Baruch <Farblungrd@aol.com> wrote:

Dear Rabbi:

I understand why a person leads the congregation in prayer and studies Torah on his parent's yahrzeit (anniversary of death). This brings merit to the deceased by his or her descendant's continuing to do mitzvot in this world. My question is how, and if, lighting a candle accomplishes this goal? Thank you.

Dear Baruch,

The soul, or *neshamah*, of the departed derives joy from the kindling of lights. This enjoyment brings the *neshamah* to a state of spiritual expansion. The *neshamah* itself is a portion of light drawn from the light of the intellect (*sechel*). In Proverbs, King Solomon refers to this when he writes, "Man's soul is G-d's candle."

Therefore every year on the anniversary of the passing of one's parent, or other relatives, one kindles a light, called the *yahrzeit* candle; for on this day, the *neshamah* has permission to travel about in the world. It comes and sees the light burning for it, and receives spiritual satisfaction from this.

Some authorities write that it's best to light the *yahrtzeit* candle in the synagogue. Perhaps this brings merit to the deceased by enhancing the honor and ambiance of the synagogue.

Sources:

- Elef Hamagen, Sha'ar 3, cited in "Mourning in Halacha" by Rabbi Chaim Binyamin Goldberg

Yiddle Riddle

My son is beginning to learn Hebrew, and he knows all the letters. But he makes mistakes with the vowels, and with knowing where the words begin and end.

For example, the other day he was reading from the Chumash, and he came across a phrase that he translated into English as "Who? Who? Who? Who? What?" What verse was he reading?

Answer next week...

THE PUBLIC DOMAIN

*Comments, quibbles, and reactions
concerning previous "Ask-the-Rabbi" features*

Re: Bowing and Martial Arts (Ohrnet Purim Issue):

There is a midrash that when the king's servants asked Mordechai why he didn't bow to Haman, when even his ancestor Yaakov bowed to Esav, Mordechai replied that he is descended from Binyamin the son of Yaakov who never bowed to anyone in his lifetime. It was in this merit that the *Beis Hamikdash* was chosen to be in the portion of Binyamin, where all the nations of the world would bow down to G-d, "so I too will bow to no one but G-d!" (*Targum Sheini to Megillas Esther 3:3*)

Incidentally, I know of a Jewish G-d fearing karate teacher (he's second-Dah-black belt in four different martial arts!) who for this reason forbids bowing in his classes and instead makes opponents shake hands before a fight! *Mi k'amcha Yisrael* - Who is like Your people Israel!

Dons Hool, Kolllel Ponevez, Israel

Dear Ohrnet:

Dear Ohrnet,

Thank you so much for your beautiful magazine! Since my brothers began to bring it home from shul on Friday nights, it has been one of the highlights of my Shabbos. The parsha insights are so enjoyable — for me, they are a fresh look at the parshios I've learned so many times. Also, the letters from "Ask the Rabbi" that are printed, even if I know the answers, often contain new ideas that I hadn't previously thought of. "Sherlox Holmes," "The Other Side of the Story" and "Yiddle Riddle" enhance the conversation at our Shabbos table, too.

I hope you will continue publishing this wonderful publication for many years to come. Enclosed please find my check for \$100 as my token of gratitude.

Sincerely,

A Reader in Israel

Re: Covered Eyes (Ohrnet Ki Tisa):

One can also add (as was confirmed to me by my grandmother) that the ladies cover their eyes when lighting the Shabbat candles in order to concentrate better on the blessing, as men do with the "*shema*."

Samuel Cohen <SamuelC@ackerstein.co.il>

Re: Candles in the Dark:

I wish to bring attention to a serious halachic problem that might occur when going to a hotel for Shabbos or Yom Tov. The problem being where to light candles. Hotels do not allow lighting in the room or at the table, but usually in a place where the candles are out of the way or in the hall. This practice is not in accordance with halacha (since these candles neither illuminate the Shabbos table nor any other darkened room) and any blessing made there is, unfortunately, in vain.

Schaeffer, Jerusalem <moshe@cheerful.com>

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