

MORASHAH
THE RABBINIC FELLOWSHIP OF THE UTJ
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Parashat HaShavuah Series

Parashat Emor

Often, an English translation smoothes out the Hebrew in such a way that we might miss how our rabbis got to an important insight. Thus in this week's portion, the New JPS translates Leviticus 22: 31 *ush'martem mitzvotai v'asitem otam* "You shall faithfully observe My commandments." The translators understood this as a hendiadys, which my helpful Merriam Webster online dictionary defines as: "the expression of an idea by the use of usually two independent words connected by *and* (as *nice and warm*) instead of the usual combination of independent word and its modifier (as *nicely warm*). So instead of "you shall observe My commandments and perform them" (the translation found in Artscroll), we get "faithfully observe My commandments."

The NJPS catches what indeed may be the true meaning – yet with that translation, we cannot really understand what is written in the *Sifra*, the rabbinic commentary to Leviticus. There we find the comment: "You shall observe My commandments' this is the study, 'and perform them' this is the practice" – which teaches that anyone who is not involved in the study is not involved in the performance. Rabbi Shimshon of Shantz in his commentary to the *Sifra* explains that one must learn how to perform the *mitzvot*.

A similar idea is found in *Pirkei Avot* 2:5 "He (Hillel) used to say: 'an uncultured person is not sin-fearing, neither is an ignorant person pious.'" True observance of *mitzvot* requires knowledge. Judaism is an approach to life that emphasizes the intellect. If *mitzvot* represent the will of God, then the only way to fulfill God's will is by understanding what He is asking of us. We can do that only if we study and learn Torah.

But study, the intellect alone, is not sufficient. One can study Judaism at a university, whether one is Jewish or not. Some in religious studies want to know about different religions. Just because they may study the religious practices of the inhabitants of Papua, New Guinea, that doesn't mean that it will have an impact on their lives. True piety, true religiosity, requires action. What good is it to know all about the meaning of *tzedakah* if one never provides assistance to the poor? Ours is not a faith observed by hermits sitting in a cave, but by people living among people.

The question was asked of Rabbi Tarfon and Rabbi Akiva: which is greater – study or deed? Rabbi Tarfon replied deed is greater. Rabbi Akiva

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answered that study is greater. Then everyone there said that study is greater because it leads to deed.

Study is greater because as a result of our study, we will come to deed, which means that the ultimate purpose of study is the deed. That implies that deed is greater! But we just heard that study is greater!

We cannot separate the two. The performance of *mitzvot* is the fulfillment of the desire of the Kadosh Baruch Hu. The only way we can fulfill His will is by studying Torah. But if we separate our study from the performance of *mitzvot* – we have missed the boat!

Shabbat Shalom!

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