

Dear Community,

The older and (hopefully) wiser we grow, the more those ideas we took for granted are thrown into doubt. Concepts that are so clear to the young mind torment the old with their ambiguity. My 12th-grade teacher, Rabbi Weintraub, would often admonish us, “What do you know today that you didn’t know yesterday? What *don’t* you know today that you knew yesterday? Unless you have both, you are not growing.” In this week’s Parsha, some of the facile truisms that we associate with Judaism are challenged.

The Torah relates the devastating error the Jewish nation committed to sending spies to scout their Promised Holy Land. Our ancestors failed to internalize the lessons of last week’s Parsha, choosing to embrace the earth instead of grabbing the stars. Rejecting a spiritual existence, one predicated on a complete reliance on G-d, they chose a material one, which demanded a reliance on traditional military strategy. Moshe saw the dangers inherent in this decision and worried about his prize pupil, the future leader of the Jewish people. Rashi relates that Moshe prayed for Yehoshua’s spiritual safety and return from the spying expedition.

This episode raises serious questions, challenging our own intuitive beliefs about free will as well as being seemingly inconsistent with other concepts in Judaism. How can Moshe pray for his student not to falter? Doesn’t Yehoshua possess the free will to choose to sin or to not sin? Doesn’t G-d give us the space to make our own decisions? In fact, the Talmud writes (Tractate Brachos 33b) that “All is in the hand of Heaven, except for fear of Heaven”: while G-d controls all external factors, the path to Heaven or Hell is ours to choose.

Some resolve this question by positing that Moshe was praying for Yehoshua to encounter fortuitous and spiritually protective circumstances. However, in the best Talmudic tradition, this introduces another question: according to the accepted wisdom, a notion prevalent in Rabbinic literature, effort and not results matters. No matter the

circumstances, as long as Yehoshua is making the right decisions and effort expected of him, what more is there to desire?

Looking more closely, we see this tension reflected in other Talmudic passages. For example, in Tractate Brachos (16B), the Talmud transcribes some of the personal prayers of various Talmudic sages. We see that they consistently beseech divine assistance in their service of G-d. However, on the bottom of the same page, the Talmud rhapsodizes about the beauty of divine service where effort alone is counted. This throws into relief these same two questions: why are goals important if all that matters is the effort? And how can G-d assist us in serving him if we are creatures of free will? In fact, one of the most salient lessons the Talmud teaches about how to relate to evil people, as taught by Bruria, is “One should pray for the destruction of evil, not evil-doers.” This seems to negate the free will of said evil-doers as well.

A complete resolution of this question is too broad a topic to explore in this medium, but as I was taught in Brisk, sometimes more is gained from a question than from an answer. I will the question of free will for our Shabbos sermon, here let us focus the second question of understanding the relationship between efforts and results in Judaism.

There is a facile and mendacious narrative prevalent in our society regarding the dynamics of religious service. Religion is viewed as a personal, self-directed, and individualistic exploration of my own sense of meaning in life. Religious service is to serve the individual and the community in living a more fulfilling existence. It's the thought that counts! G-d wants me to feel authentic more than He wants me to suffer through some dusty ritual- especially if something about the ritual offends my personal value system. Personal expression is primary: what is important is that I feel Jewish and I feel a relationship with G-d. All G-d wants is for us to be good people who try.

However, this perception misses the primary reality on which Judaism is based. The tangible world we see and feel is a shell for a deep spiritual construct governed by its own incontrovertible set of spiritual laws, analogous to the physical laws of nature (e.g.,

gravity and electromagnetism). Our job is to maneuver in this world and engage in the process of creation and completion as partners with G-d, by following His spiritual laws as our literal Bible. When we sin, we are not merely suffering from a personal failing: we are actually causing destruction for all of us.

As far as G-d's judgment of Heaven and Hell, it is true that we are judged on our actions. Our circumstances and motivations are what is examined. This is how we are judged individually, were we a good soldier. However, reality being what it is, whether we are at fault for some event or not, the event happened regardless. When sin happens, no matter our liability, the damage is done.

These Rabbis praying for righteousness were not praying to pad their own account in heaven, rather they were praying for the opportunity to improve our world. Bruria was seeking for the evildoers to stop destroying our world, stopping stop evil from occurring, not divinely doctoring this individual's faults. When we do mitzvot, we need to look past the narrow scope of our own heaven and hell and focus on the higher mission of building and improving our world, the activity described in Alienu as Tikun Olam. It is tragically ironic that some Jews desecrate Torah in order to engage in Tikun Olam work. We are of course enjoined to protect and improve our material world as well, but to violate the entire Torah, destroying our world, and then claiming divine work through our social justice and humanitarian causes is intellectually inconsistent.

We must look at our observance not in a self-centered "only my heaven matters" we must work to improve out the world with the same sense of mission and purpose that we dedicate to our pursuit of social justice and reform. These Rabbis were not praying for themselves, they were praying for us, working for us. Are we doing the same for others?

Good Shabbos,

Rabbi Agishtein

