

JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

Parshat Emor

We are known as the People of the Book. It is a moniker that often connotes our national dedication to literacy and knowledge. Jews have been thinkers and intellectuals for hundreds of generations. Some opine that there is value in knowledge for the sake of knowledge. What does the “Book” itself say about this topic? This week’s portion, Parshat Emor, gives us an approach.

“And you shall guard [uSHmartem] my commandments and do them [vaAsitem]! For I am Hashem” [Leviticus 22:31].

There is an obvious question here. What is the difference between “guarding” and “doing” the commandments? At first glance, the verse seems redundant.

Normally, guarding or shemirah is a reference to avoiding sin, i.e. not violating the negative commandments; while doing, or aseï, is the command to fulfill positive mitzvot. However, Rashi, based on the words of the Sages, takes a different approach. Rashi explains that “guarding” in this context includes learning; while, “doing” is referring to the action of doing mitzvot.

The super-commentaries’ explanation of our Rashi teaches us two important lessons.

The first is gleaned from one of the Sefer haZikaron. He suggests that Rashi’s source, namely, the Sages, understood that the verse was meant to be viewed homiletically because of the aforementioned problem. They thought the double expression in the verse redundant. If you are going to “do the mitzvot” than why is one required to “watch them” too? Consequently, they extrapolated that ushmartem is teaching a different message. And that is that you need to study the Torah.

In fact, Maimonides writes that the very first words parents are supposed to teach their children is “Torah tziva lanu Moshe, morasha kehilat Yaakov” — “Torah was commanded to us through Moses and it is the inheritance of every Jew.” The study of Torah is meant for everybody. It is not the exclusive domain of some spiritual class. Rather, it is a Torah that we refer to as being “the love and length of our days” [liturgy, evening service]. In a very real sense it is the lifeblood of our Jewish nation.

Maimonides writes:

Every Jew is obligated to study Torah, whether he is poor or rich, healthy or ill, young or old. Even if one is destitute; or if he has familial obligations, he must still establish fixed times for Torah study — day and night, as it says (Joshua 1:8), “You shall toil in it day and night.

[Mishneh Torah, Laws of Torah Study 1:8-9]

By contrast, there are other religions that historically preferred that the general populace remain ignorant and illiterate. It was only the priests who knew how to read. Clearly though, study is an integral part of Judaism and Torah observance.

A second super-commentary, Maskil LiDovid, uses an alternative approach to deal with the question of redundancy. He suggests that the main purpose of mishnah or learning is in order to guard and do. In other words, one can only do when one is aware of one’s obligations. Action must always be preceded by study. Therefore the Torah is imploring one to study so that one may best perform the mitzvot.



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According to this understanding, Jewish knowledge is great. Jewish literacy is crucial. But it is limited. It is a means to an end. This brings to mind a number of teachings in Ethics of the Fathers. Shimon be Gamliel, would say: "The essential thing is not study, but deed" [1:17]. Furthermore, "More than you study - do" [6:5]. Clearly, the idea is that study leads to action and that study on its own is insignificant. This is our second principle.

It seems that the two aforementioned principles are somewhat contradictory. On the one hand we learned how important and beautiful learning Torah is for its own sake. On the other hand though, we learned how study must lead to action. These seem to be two mutually exclusive ideals.

Perhaps we can best answer this question by looking back at history. Just before the Event at Sinai in which G-d spoke to the people and taught them the Ten Commandments; Moshe, speaking on behalf of G-d offered the Torah to the Jewish people. They famously responded, "Na'aseh viNishmah" - "We will do and we will hear." The obvious question is that the agreement was out of order. When agreeing to G-d, they should have first found out what He wanted. How could they possibly say we will do and then we will hear? According to the Bait haLevi's explanation of the event, they were actually making two separate statements. First of all we will do. Secondly we will hear. How will we do? By studying and learning. And we will continue to hear. How? By continuing to study and learn even after we know what we do. They realized that there is value in the study of the Torah for its own sake.

It seems that when these two ideals are valued simultaneously it gives deep and significant meaning to each one. Each one on its own though is problematic. While it is true that there is value in learning Torah for its own sake, study must be accompanied by action. As Rabban Gamliel the son of Rabbi Judah HaNassi would say "Ultimately, all Torah study that is not accompanied with work is destined to cease and to cause sin" [Ethics of the Fathers 2:2]. On the other hand, study is never complete. One does not only learn in order to best perform, but rather there is significant value in the study of Torah itself. One possible reason, among many, is that people who perform mitzvot are at risk for doing them by rote. As Isaiah said, "And the Lord said: 'Because this people has come near; with their mouth and with their lips they honor Me, but their heart they draw far away from Me, and their fear of Me has become a command of people, which has been taught'" [29:13]. In other words the people perform the mitzvot as a result of the way they were raised. When done by rote religious observance loses its spiritual significance and becomes cultural. The antidote to this problem is continued study. Study inspires and enables people to grow.

In conclusion, we have learned that both principles are true. Knowledge for its own sake is of value, and knowledge in order to act is of value as well. However, each one on its own is limited. It is only when we join the two together that we give deep meaning to these ideals. It is this truth that the people realized when they said, "We will do and we will hear." Finally, perhaps it is worth bearing in mind the advice of Rabbi Ishmael the son of Rabbi Yossef. He would say: "One who learns Torah in order to teach - is given the opportunity to learn and teach. One who learns in order to do - is given the opportunity to learn, teach, observe and do" [Ethics of the Fathers 4:5].

Shabbat Shalom!

