

VAESCHANAN (DEUTERONOMY 3:23-7:11)

Do as I Say, Not as I Do!

2005 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplovitz

It is widely believed that Jews, whether liked by their neighbors or not, are considered intelligent. Everybody knows that we place great emphasis on learning. My son, asked by locals in Beijing about the funny cap on his head, informed them that he is Jewish. “Oh, Jews are very smart!” they said.

This reputation goes back to Biblical times. Moses, shortly before his death, advised the Nation of Israel of its special status:

“See, I have taught you decrees and ordinances, as G-d has commanded me, to perform in the Land to which you are coming, to possess it. Safeguard and perform them, for it is your wisdom and discernment in the eyes of the nations, who will hear of these decrees and say, “Surely a wise and discerning people are this great nation.” (Deuteronomy, 4:5-6)

There is more to wisdom than the knowledge of facts. Actions speak louder than words. Moses was emphasizing performance.

*“... decrees and ordinances ... **TO PERFORM** in the Land to which you are coming...”*

Many Commandments apply only in the Land of Israel. Tithes, the Sabbatical Year, and everything relating to the Temple Service can only be done in Israel. Moses was speaking about “... *decrees and ordinances ... to perform **IN THE LAND** to which you are coming...*” – Commandments that Moses would never live to fulfill.

The Chasam Sofer explains that Moses was issuing a “disclaimer.”

Studying Torah is an inspiring spiritual experience. Delving into the Word of G-d elevates us and makes us into better people. But it has to be done correctly. When we study G-d’s Torah, He helps us in our learning. The Talmud states that the degree of success one achieves in Torah study is dependant upon his goal:

“One who studies in order to teach is given the means to study and to teach; one who studies in order to practice is given the means to study and to teach, to observe and to practice.” (Avos, 4:5)

The true power of Torah learning comes only when it has a practical application. Moses appears to have been teaching the Nation of Israel about Commandments which, for him personally, were merely theoretical.

Moses wanted to clarify to Israel that his teachings were NOT theoretical. True, he would not live long enough to fulfill any of the Commandments that are Israel-based. However, the lesson that he was teaching Israel was that his Torah teaching had the value of practical law due to the fact that THEY would perform these Mitzvahs.

In all due respect, what is the point here? What difference does it make whether Moses was quoting a law that, to him, was not practical? As long as Israel hears the law, isn't that good enough? Does it really matter what Moses personally was going to do?

Yes, it makes a very big difference. Saying, "Do as I say, not as I do," sometimes means don't bother listening to anything I have to say because I'm not really that serious about it.

Rabbi Sholom Schwadron once came across a nonobservant Jew who was about to deliver a class on a Torah topic. "Don't worry," he tried to assure Rabbi Schwadron. "I'll only quote 'Kosher' sources."

"Let me ask you a question," responded the rabbi. "If you make a soup out of Kosher ingredients but cook it in a pot that was last used for cooking pork, how Kosher is the soup? It is very nice that you plan to quote 'Kosher' sources in your presentation. But how Kosher could your presentation be if you demonstrate by your lifestyle that you have no respect for the sources you are quoting?!"

If you have been reading my column for a while, you may have noticed that I occasionally harp on the so-called "experts" in Jewish mysticism who make lots of money teaching those who are even more ignorant than they are about things they couldn't possibly begin to understand. I would include in this group the majority of teachers in the Judaic Studies departments of universities. (Yes, I know that some of my readers get upset when I paint with a broad brush. There are a few exceptions. Very few.)

Torah is not an intellectual pursuit that can be analyzed and criticized in the halls of academia. It is not a discipline whose merits and demerits can be compared and contrasted with Zen and Tai Chi. Torah is a communication from G-d, telling us how He expects us to live our lives. As such, it is most effective when it is communicated by the committed to the committed. (Or, at least, by the committed to those who are open to becoming more committed.)

Rabbi Simcha Wasserman was a great Torah sage who taught Torah to all types of people from all types of backgrounds. He taught scholarly lectures in Talmud as well as introductory classes for beginners. He had a very interesting approach to introductory classes. Quoting from the Talmudic passage cited above,

Rabbi Wasserman maintained that the sacred power of Torah study is at its most potent when it is studied *“in order to practice.”*

Rabbi Wasserman was reluctant to teach the laws of the Sabbath or Kashruth to someone who didn't yet feel ready to commit himself to these rules. If Torah is not being taught with a practical application in mind, it doesn't “work.” He preferred to teach Genesis to beginners. When learning about Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, etc., the student is exposed to lessons in honesty, humility, and faith. This is something he can relate to! Later on, as the student developed a greater appreciation for the sanctity and relevance of Torah, Rabbi Wasserman expanded the topics to other matters that could now become practical as well.

I often hear and read criticisms of religious Jews for not being willing to be open to other people's opinions. Case in point: Many years ago, I discovered that my congregation was listed on the letterhead of a particular organization as a sponsoring congregation. This educational organization used to take children on trips on the Sabbath. I respectfully requested that they remove my congregation from their letterhead. As an orthodox synagogue, I explained, we could not sponsor an organization that promotes the desecration of the Sabbath.

I later heard that when my request was discussed at their board meeting, I was raked over the coals as a dogmatic ideologue. Why is he so intolerant, they demanded. How does it hurt him if our students decide to go to a ball game on Saturday? Why is he trying to force his religious beliefs on us?!

Their position is understandable when you look at their view of the Sabbath as opposed to mine. They viewed the Torah as Jewish culture – take what you like and leave the rest. I view Torah as a practical guidebook. When G-d told us in this week's Torah Portion to *guard the Sabbath day to keep it holy (Deuteronomy, 5:12)*, it wasn't a suggestion; it was an order!

My defense came from an unlikely corner. A person far less observant than myself said, “Rabbi Sepowitz is not forcing Sabbath observance on our students. It is WE who are trying to force him to endorse something in which he doesn't believe. WE are the ones who are intolerant of HIS position!

“Why is it,” he asked, “that we find it easy to expect others to be liberal about those things that we are liberal about? If we are so open-minded, why can't we be open to the idea that there are people whose religious values are nonnegotiable?”

Another thought.

“I have taught you decrees and ordinances, as G-d has commanded me, to perform in the Land to which you are coming . . .”

Perhaps one could ask, “Moses, nothing personal, but you are a Diaspora Jew. Why are you telling us what to do when we get to Israel?”

To this, Moses responds, *“I have taught you decrees and ordinances, AS G-D HAS COMMANDED ME, to perform in the Land to which you are coming . . .”*

“You are absolutely right,” says Moses. “I won’t be in the Land. I won’t be able to personally gauge and evaluate the issues that will confront you when you get there. However, I am qualified to tell you what to do AS G-D HAS COMMANDED ME. I have the advantage of divine instruction.”

You and I, however, do not. We all have our own opinions as to what is best for our brothers and sisters in Israel. Many of us, including this writer as recently as last week, have been very critical of the government of Israel’s decisions to force Gaza residents out of their homes. I haven’t changed my mind. HOWEVER . . .

I read an article this week about a group of Americans who made Aliyah a few days ago. They were met at the airport by an Israeli government official who was subjected to anger and bitterness from the new American-Israelis upset over the impending disengagement. These are people who left the comfort of their homes in America in order to enter Israeli society. These are people who have earned the right to an opinion.

It is easy for us to sit in our homes in New York, Chicago, and L.A., and criticize the Israeli government’s assessment of their security needs. Moses could dictate how to live in Israel, because G-d told him to. (And in those situations where Israeli law violates Torah Law, we DO have a right to object. And, it is important to keep in mind that in the opinion of many Israeli rabbis, the disengagement does violate Jewish Law.)

I’m not Moses. When I become an Israeli citizen, I will earn the right to vote for or against Sharon and his policies. For now, I’ll just pray for the well-being of Gazan and all other Jewish Israelis. May they all live in peace and prosperity.

Have a great Shabbos.

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