

TERUMAH (EXODUS 25:1-27:19)

Better than Nothing?

2006 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

Judaism, as we know it today, is not practiced the way it is supposed to be.

Case in point: the Passover Seder. The last food item we eat on the first two nights of Passover is Matzah. At the end of the meal, we each have a piece of Matzah for Afikoman, the Seder dessert.

Who would dream of skipping the Afikoman? This piece of Matzah has become a major source of excitement (and income!) to children of all ages. Adults try to hide it from the children who, ultimately, find and re-hide this treasure from their parents, holding it in for “ransom.”

Afikoman is actually an unfortunate surrogate for an important Mitzvah. We eat this piece of Matzah to commemorate the Passover Offering, a roasted lamb that was eaten in Temple times.

The Torah tells us that on the first night of Passover, at the end of the meal, we are supposed to eat the meat of a specially prepared lamb. This lamb meat is to be eaten with Matzah and bitter herbs. The lamb was slaughtered on the eve of Passover in the Temple. Today, the Temple lies in ruins, and we are prevented from fulfilling this Commandment. Nowadays, we eat the Afikoman in memory of that lamb.

If you can't do something perfectly, you do the best you can. No Passover Offering? O.K., maybe next year. Meanwhile, do something else in memory of that Mitzvah. It's better than nothing.

No one is perfect. We strive to fulfill every Mitzvah we can, but we all fall short of that goal. So we do our best.

We are all required to observe the Sabbath. Unfortunately, not all of us do. We are all required to observe the Kosher Laws all the time. Unfortunately, not all of us do.

If a person chooses to do one Mitzvah and ignore another, does that make him a hypocrite? No, it just makes him inconsistent. (As we all are, to one degree or another.)

If someone doesn't observe the Sabbath, should he therefore skip the Kosher Laws as well? What if he wants to keep Kosher SOMETIMES? Is it wrong for a person with a Kosher home to eat non-Kosher food in a restaurant? Of course it is! But it is even more wrong to use the fact that he eats in restaurants as an excuse to eat non-Kosher in his home.

You don't have time or the desire to put on Tefillin and recite the entire Morning Service every day? Well, lack of desire is not an excuse, but for some people, it is a reality. O.K., so why don't you put on Tefillin anyway? It only takes a few minutes. It's better than nothing.

Christianity is the religion that teaches that if you can't/won't/don't observe every Commandment to perfection, you're wasting your time and you are condemned as a sinner. That is not a Torah concept. Do every Mitzvah you can. It's better than nothing.

This concept seems to be contradicted by a passage in this week's Torah Portion.

Moses was commanded to build a traveling Tabernacle in the desert. This temporary structure was our first Temple. And the two Temples in Jerusalem were based upon the set-up of the Tabernacle.

The furnishings of the Tabernacle are described in great detail. Among these furnishings was the Ark, a wood-and-gold box that housed the Tablets of the Ten Commandments. (See "Heavy Metal".)

The Second Temple was a mere shadow of the first one. The miracles that took place daily in the First Temple did not occur in the Second. Many of the furnishings, including the Ark, were not there.

Shortly before the First Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed, the Ark, containing the Ten Commandments, was hidden away in a secret cavern beneath the Temple. It has never (yet) been located.

One wonders why there was no Ark in the Second Temple. The Torah describes how it was to be made. There was certainly plenty of wood and gold available to the builders of the Second Temple. Couldn't they just build a new Ark?

No, they could not. The Tablets had been hidden away. If there were no Tablets to be housed in the Ark, there could be no Ark.

But why not? We are supposed to do the best we can! If we don't do the Mitzvah perfectly, why don't we do the next best thing? Isn't an empty Ark better than no Ark at all? Isn't it better than nothing?

The answer can be found by looking in Rashi's commentary. The Torah seems to repeat itself.

First, the Torah describes how to make the Ark, concluding with the command: "*You will put into the Ark the Testimony (i.e., the Tablets) that I will give you.*" (Exodus 25:16) Then the Torah goes on to describe the lid that goes on top of the Ark, concluding with the command: "*You will place the lid on the Ark from above, and into the Ark you will put the Testimony that I will give you.*" (Ibid, verse 21) Why the repetition? Rashi explains that the Torah is emphasizing that the lid may not be placed onto the Ark unless the Tablets have already been placed inside. Even to temporarily place the cover on the Ark, lifting it later to insert the Tablets is unacceptable.

Therefore, we can see why there was no Ark in the Second Temple. An Ark without the Tablets inside is no Ark at all!

We can, perhaps, understand this concept by examining the Mitzvah of Tefillin. The Torah tells us to take four different sections from the Torah, written on parchment, and place them into black leather boxes. One of the 613 Commandments is to place one of these boxes onto one's arm. Another one of the 613 Commandments is to wear one of these boxes on one's head.

What happens if you lose one of your two Tefillin? You put on the one you have. It's better than nothing. What happens if your Tefillin boxes are missing one of the four required parchment sections from the Torah? Don't bother; it IS nothing!

The difference between the two scenarios is that when you lose the ability to put on the head Tefillin, there is still a separate Mitzvah to put on the other. When the Tefillin don't contain the requisite sections from the Torah, there is no Mitzvah at all that can be fulfilled; the Tefillin are invalid.

It seems to me that the Torah is giving us a very clear message in reference to the Ark. The Torah is telling us to avoid symbolism without substance. There is, obviously, a great deal of symbolism in Judaism, but it needs to be for real. An Ark without Tablets looks the same as an Ark with Tablets, as long as the cover is on. The problem is that there is nothing inside.

The Torah was not given to us to be fulfilled if and when we feel like it, and subject to the whims of our personal interpretations. When a person puts on only one of the two Tefillin boxes, he is at least: 1) fulfilling a complete Mitzvah, and 2) aware of the fact that he's not doing everything he's supposed to do. When he dons Tefillin that do not contain the necessary ingredients, it is possible to delude oneself into thinking that he is fulfilling something. In such a situation, he is making what is literally an empty gesture. In such a situation, nothing is better than something.

It is possible to go through the motions of religious observance without actually internalizing it all. G-d told Moses, "*They will make for Me a sanctuary, so that I may dwell among them.*" (Ibid, verse 9)

G-d wants to dwell among us. If we give Him dysfunctional furniture, He has no place to sit!

Have a great Shabbos.

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