

THE SPIRITUAL GOAL

by Dr. Abraham Twerski

The clearest definition of a concept is often derived by contrasting it with its opposite. Thus, we can better understand heat as the opposite of cold and vice versa. We may better understand simchah ? the Jewish concept of joy ? by contrasting it with its opposite.

There were several stories that my father repeated a number of times. I am certain that this was because he wished to impress upon us the importance of the message conveyed by the story. One such story was about a man who had been sentenced to 25 years of hard labor. His wrists were shackled to the handle of a huge wheel that was set in the wall. All his waking hours he had to turn this massive wheel. He would often wonder what it was that he was doing. Perhaps he was grinding grain into flour or bringing up subterranean water to irrigate fields.

After the long sentence was completed and the shackles were removed, he ran to the other side of the wall. Upon seeing that the wheel was not attached to anything, he collapsed. Twenty-five years of backbreaking work, all for nothing! He was able to survive 25 years of bone-crushing labor, but the feeling that it was futile, all for naught, was more than he could bear.

Just as the most depressing feeling is futility, so the most elevating feeling is accomplishment. Yet, if one thinks of accomplishment in terms of a tangible achievement, one may be easily frustrated. The fact is that we have no control over outcome. We may plan something very carefully and execute our plan to the minutest detail, but factors beyond our control may prevent its coming to fruition.

Our culture is so entrenched in commercialism that our concepts of good and bad, right and wrong have been heavily influenced by commercial criteria. For example, a business that is successful and very profitable is a "good" business venture, even though the entrepreneur may have gone into the business carelessly and recklessly. If he reaped a windfall profit, even if his tactics were unethical or perhaps bordering on illegal, it was the right thing to do, and he is considered a shrewd businessman. If a person goes into a business venture with much careful planning, yet the business fails, it was the wrong thing to do and he is considered a poor businessman. Commerce is judged by the bottom line, and while this is appropriate for commerce, it has no place in one's personal and ethical life.

In contrast to commerce, a person's ethical life should be based on process and method rather than on results. For example, a greedy surgeon may perform an uncalled-for operation simply to collect a fee. As a result of the unnecessary surgery he discovers a tiny malignant tumor that he removes, thereby saving the patient's life. He is nevertheless an unscrupulous surgeon. On the other hand, a surgeon may have agonized about performing an operation on a patient with a life-threatening condition, which is generally correctable by surgery. However, for this patient, the operation has a considerable risk. After obtaining adequate consultation and giving it much thought, he decides that the patient's best chances for survival are with the surgery. Unfortunately, the patient dies. Yet, he is a dedicated and ethical surgeon. If one judges by outcome, the former surgeon is good and the latter is bad, but if one judges by method, the opposite is true.

This is true of mitzvot and of every aspect of spirituality. The merit is in the process rather than in a fixed goal. The goal of life for a Jew, as explained in Mesilas Yesarim and chassidic writings, is to draw ever closer to God. Inasmuch as God is infinite, there is never an endpoint. One can never say, "I have reached God." To the contrary, if one feels he has already arrived, he is more distant than ever.

One of the Baal Shem Tov's disciples complained of great frustration. "I try to draw myself closer to God," he said, "but just when I feel a closeness, I am thrown back a distance."

The Baal Shem Tov explained with a parable. A father wished to teach his infant child to walk. When the child could stand upright, the father placed himself in front of the child, stretched out his arms, and beckoned to the child. Having always balanced himself on all fours, the child was fearful of taking a first step. However, seeing that his father was so close that he could catch him if he fell, the child felt safe in venturing the first step. The father then moved back a bit, and again beckoned to the child. Having taken a step without falling and seeing the father still close, the child has the courage to take two steps. The father then moves a bit farther back and continues retreating as the child advances.

The child must be thinking, What is going on here? The more I try to reach my father, the farther away he goes! What is happening here is that there are two disparate goals. The child's goal is to reach the father. The father's goal is to teach the child how to walk. The moment the father allows the child to reach him, the lesson is over and the growth process has come to an end.

"Your goal," the Baal Shem Tov said to the disciple, "is to reach God. God's goal is for you to grow spiritually by striving to reach Him. That growth would come to an end if God allowed you to reach

Him. Therefore, just as with the father and the infant, God keeps moving back, so that you strive yet again to reach Him."

Thus, in contrast to most of our activities that have a finite goal, in spirituality the process is the goal.

The contrast is even greater, because in our mundane activities in which we have a fixed goal, the process is actually burdensome. We may put in laborious effort to earn money because there is no other way to obtain it. If we could have the money without any effort, we would be delighted. We tolerate the process only because it is necessary to reach the goal, but we would gladly do without it. Just the reverse occurs in spirituality, where the process is everything. As the Rebbe of Kotzk commented on the verse "From there you will seek God, your God, and you will find Him" (Deuteronomy 4:29) ? "the seeking is the finding."

In our daily activities, we have many intermediate goals, but no ultimate goal. This is why we are never satisfied with earthly achievements. The Talmud says, "No one leaves this world having achieved even half of his desires." People who are extremely wealthy and who have more money than they could consume in six lifetimes still continue to work to increase their wealth. There is no enduring satisfaction in achieving material aspirations. We have the pleasure of the moment, but it is evanescent, and we quickly pursue other pleasures...

It is characteristic of all intermediate goals that while their achievement may result in pleasure, that pleasure eventually wanes and one soon seeks additional pleasures. The enjoyment of a tasty dish is momentary, and just one hour after eating, that pleasure is gone. The pleasure of owning a new automobile may last for a number of days rather than minutes, but eventually the novelty wears off and it is just a vehicle. We may have an intense desire for something and we may feel that its acquisition will make us happy. However, if we will be truthful with ourselves, we will realize that this feeling is fleeting and that no earthly pleasure has endurance. We will realize the validity of King Solomon's statement, "What lasting gain does a person have from all his toil under the sun?" (Ecclesiastes 1:3). Our sages explain that "under the sun" refers to all earthly activities, none of which can provide more than fleeting satisfaction.

It is different with spirituality. Because the process is the goal, every bit is an achievement. There is never any futility in serving God. Inasmuch as achievement brings about simchah, a life dedicated to spirituality is a life of simchah ? true joy.

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