

CHAPTER 3, MISHNA 12(A): ACTIONS SPEAK LOUDER THAN WORDS

by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld

He [Rabbi Chanina] used to say: Anyone whose [good] deeds are greater than his wisdom -- his wisdom will endure. And anyone whose wisdom is greater than his [good] deeds -- his wisdom will not endure.

This mishna continues the theme of the previous mishna. (Some editions of Pirkei Avos combine this and the previous mishna together.) Last week R. Chanina taught us that one's fear of sin must precede his Torah knowledge if his wisdom is to endure. Only one who fears sin -- who has a sense of accountability towards G-d and respect for tradition, will study the Torah with the requisite sense of commitment. He will take the Torah's messages to heart and internalize them. One, however, who studies without that basic sense of "fear" and commitment, may study out of curiosity or for intellectual stimulation -- or even spiritual stimulation -- but will not truly be ready to integrate the Torah's values into his life. His study will remain external to his essence; it will not become a part of him.

Here R. Chanina offers another requirement for having one's wisdom "endure": practice. One's deeds must be greater than his or her wisdom. He must do more than he understands. He cannot fulfill G-d's word only after he's figured it out and has made sense out of it. He must first do and only then attempt to understand.

When G-d offered the Torah to Israel at Sinai, the Children of Israel responded, "We will do and we will hear" (Exodus 24:7). They accepted to first "do": to follow the letter of the law, and only then to "hear": to study, delve and grow to appreciate.

In a sense, the reason for this is self-evident -- G-d certainly knows best; we must obey regardless of our limited ability to make sense out of it. But I believe our mishna's message is far more profound.

The Children of Israel accepted to "do" first: not to hinge their observance of the mitzvos (commandments) upon their understanding of them. This is simply because it is the height of folly to expect mitzvos which emanate from an infinite and all-knowledgeable G-d to be readily understandable to the human mind. If the Torah were manmade, if it were the brainchild of human creativity, however great, later generations could pass judgment on its worth and relevance based on their own notions of justice and morality. But the Children of Israel in the desert knew better: The Torah was not merely divinely inspired. It was the direct word of G-d. They *saw* G-d at Mount Sinai;

they heard Him speaking to Moses (as well as hearing the first two of the Ten Commandments themselves). Man's observance of the Torah could never depend on anything as limited, skewed and frivolous as human understanding.

R. Chanina, however, is not simply telling us that our observance must precede our understanding. He states that if it does not our wisdom will never endure. We must "do" or our wisdom will never truly make sense to us and become a part of us.

On one level, this is true because the Torah is not very meaningful if not put into practice. The Torah was never intended to be an abstract science. It is not merely a philosophical treatise, providing an ordered system of logical beliefs. It contains lessons for living life. It is a practical guide for living in this world and making sense of it all. It is what R. Noach Weinberg describes as G-d's Users' Guide for Planet Earth. And such knowledge will never be fully appreciated if left on the shelf. It is an applied science, not an abstract one. It instructs us in how to integrate eternal beliefs and ethical principles into real-life situations, and how to use truth and morality to build happy, functioning, and productive individuals, homes and societies. Thus, the Torah can never be absorbed in any serious way through the intellect alone. It must be practiced and lived for its beauty and wisdom to truly penetrate the soul.

I believe there is a second great truth behind R. Chanina's words, one in which Judaism distinguishes itself from many other religions. Judaism is sometimes viewed as a religion which focuses more on ritual and form than on substance and spirit. Other religions seem to preach that the important thing is to have a good heart, to believe, to love your neighbor, and to be yourself. (You'll pardon the oversimplification -- an ongoing fault of mine.)

Judaism believes in all of that of course ("Love your fellow as yourself" does come from us, mind you (Leviticus 19:18)), but it almost seems to "ruin" it by instructing us to death. There are rules and regulations for nearly everything we say and do -- what we can eat, when we can eat, how we can eat, etc. etc. ad infinitum. I mean, does G-d **really** care if we have one or two sets of dishes? Sure, some of the rituals are meaningful and help give our religion structure. But isn't simple faith enough? Isn't man essentially good? Why be bogged down with so much onerous and burdensome ritual? Why can't we just let our natural goodness shine through?

R. Chanina's answer is a bit sobering -- perhaps even a little depressing -- but contains a tremendous insight into life. G-d did not give us the Torah just so that we'd have good hearts or live with some basic tenets of belief. We actually **do** have that naturally. It was so that we'd develop ourselves as people. We all know that someone who wants to be great at almost anything -- be it an athlete, musician, pilot, or scholar -- has to train. People are not born winners (or losers for that matter). Talented athletes or musicians may have more potential than others, but realizing that potential requires lots and lots of hard work. It requires practicing, developing, honing, and drilling. And humankind likewise has an enormous potential for good -- for being giving, spiritual, godlike

individuals. But it is only potential. Realizing that potential takes work: If we want to make anything of ourselves our deeds must far outweigh our wisdom. Being good is hard work. It **is** natural, but it does not **come** naturally. (And in fact, it can easily be corrupted).

And this is the mission G-d presented us with when He created us: developing our latent abilities for good and bringing them to actuality. Towards this end G-d gave us the Torah and mitzvos -- the tools for our training. Knowledge and understanding alone are not sufficient. Our mishna tells us that we must practice if we want our wisdom to endure and truly become a part of us. By studying and practicing, we both develop good traits and sublimate "bad" ones in positive directions. But it does not happen automatically; it takes prodigious effort. For as above, being good is hard work. Being great takes a lifetime.

We learned earlier in Pirkei Avos, "Study is not the primary thing but action [is]" (1:17). The Torah instructs us in G-d's will and Divine values, but words alone will never change us. For one's wisdom to endure, he must apply it and practice it. The purpose of the Torah is not to impart knowledge. It is to fashion individuals -- into human beings in the image of G-d.

In the Sefer HaChinuch, a master treatise on the 613 Commandments, the author (a 13th Century Spanish scholar; the precise authorship is unknown) offers a profound psychological insight: One who acts a certain way -- whatever his intentions -- will be influenced by his deeds and will eventually become the person he impersonates (Mitzvah 16). Nazi underlings, under the pretext of following orders, quickly became the most bestial and sadistic of killers. And we, if we act out the part set out by the Torah, will find ourselves becoming more upright, moral, and caring human beings. Good deeds impact on a person: say we reluctantly give charity to the fundraiser who comes to our door. All good deeds influence us one way or the other, some in obvious ways, while others more subtly and metaphysically.

And this, in a single word, is the purpose of the mitzvos -- and the ultimate purpose of our Torah study. We must not approach the Torah expecting to first understand and then to do -- and certainly not with the precondition that we will do only that which we first understand. Rather, we must be prepared to do. I know the Torah was commanded by an infinite Creator, and I know it contains truth. I will make my effort and show my readiness to grow. And I know the growth will then follow.

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