

PLAN TO BE SPONTANEOUS!

by Rabbi Dovid Green

Our patriarch Yaakov passes away in this week's parsha. Before he dies, Yaakov gathers his children, the twelve tribes, and blesses each one with a unique blessing which suits each one.

It is notable, however, that realizing the blessing one receives requires personal input from the receiver. A blessing is no guarantee. It is a prayer to G-d that everything contained in the blessing should fall into place if the receiver does his part in being a fitting receiver. What is the input required to live up to one's potential? Perhaps Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch can help us understand.

In Rabbi Hirsch's 19th century Germany, one of the raging issues facing Jews was as follows. Many Jews began to espouse the popular view of life based on the philosophical views of Immanuel Kant, which was that of moral self-legislation, the paradigm for much of modern society today. It is the approach that one develops personal and social convictions from within oneself and within society, as opposed to those extrinsically imposed, such as those borne out of Torah.

Rabbi Hirsch, who occupied a position in Frankfurt at that time, rigorously made his argument for the submitting one's will and morality to the dictates of Torah. Many of Rabbi Hirsch's contemporaries wished to cast off the Torah approach which distinguished them from the society which opened its arms to them after the Napoleonic era. The theory of self-legislation was a perfect moral stepping stone to satisfy their ends, and open the doors to full acceptance in secular society.

It is reasonable to argue that the theory of self-legislation, as noble as it was, has the pitfall of only being as exalted as the society in which it is applied. Consequently, in a free society, almost everything can have its justification as long as everyone agrees. Nothing is absolute.

Rabbi Hirsch taught that a consistent and noble morality is borne out of a steady diet of Torah ideals through diligent study until a student of Torah manifests the Torah ideals spontaneously and naturally.

If it strikes you as unnatural to "program" oneself through study, and that it limits spontaneity, I will show you by analogy with sports that it actually enhances our spontaneity, and our effectiveness.

An athlete, in order to be good, must train. Through practice, exercise, and constant repetition, he develops and refines his performance in all possible circumstances that may arise in a game. He must be prepared to perform at his best under pressure. Training involves "walking through" all kinds

of offensive and defensive moves, and rehearsing repeatedly, until the required behaviors are natural. Effective training will even enhance the athletes ability to react properly in an unforeseen circumstance. Through training it becomes natural.

The same is true in life, only more so. Life is where it really counts. In order to realize our greatness, we must also train, and cultivate desirable traits in ourselves. These are the tools which we use when interacting with the world. The traits of generosity, compassion, sharing each other's happiness and pain, being charitable, and countless more, all have their source in Torah. The people who study and practice Torah come to embody these ideals.

Consequently, Torah study and observance is a discipline, in some ways like other disciplines. Every person is unique, and has great potential to bring out. However, it must be coaxed out. It takes training, refining the raw materials, and only after that can we hope that the end product will be worthy of great favor and blessing.

Good Shabbos!

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