

# DOING THE RIGHT THING

*by Rabbi Aron Tendler*

The greatest challenge we face as humans is doing what is the right thing rather than what we think is the right thing. Therefore, it is crucial that we know what the right thing is, and that we teach it to our students and children.

The Rambam extracted his Thirteen Principles of Faith from the vastness of the Oral Torah. In doing so he gifted us with an understanding of Who G-d is, how G-d communicates with humanity, and the absolute appreciation that there are consequences to our actions. In addition, the Rambam established that the foundation of the Torah and our relationship with G-d is faith in G-d's existence and trust in His never-ceasing benevolence.

Simply put, the definitive criteria for "what is the right thing" is anything that G-d commanded in the Torah. If G-d said to do it, it must be the right thing; and if G-d said not to do it, it must be the wrong thing. Furthermore, whatever G-d does must be the right thing. (Is there an inverse to that equation?)

The logic follows the Rambam's Thirteen Principles. In the first five Principles the Rambam defined Who and What G-d is. He established that the base line of our faith and trust believes that there is a G-d Who created and maintains the universe. The next four Principles define how G-d communicated His expectations (commandments) to humanity. They established the fundamental criteria for defining the right thing and the wrong thing.

Obviously, we must accept G-d's existence before we can accept that He gave commandments. We must accept that there is a G-d before we accept that an absolute criterion exists for defining the right thing and the wrong thing.

The remaining four Principles define reward and punishment. As law-abiding citizens and families, we all appreciate that actions must have consequences. If G-d exists and He gave us commandments, there must be consequences, whether for doing the right thing or the wrong thing.

This week's Parsha details Korach's rebellion against Moshe and G-d. The Talmud describes Korach's rebellion as a Halachik (legal) challenge. "Does a four cornered, Techeles (unique ancient dye recently rediscovered and produced) dyed garment require Tzitzis (fringes)? Does a home filled with books of Torah require a Mezuzah?"

Korach's underlying challenge to Moshe was obvious. Must we accept the 613 commandments as absolute definitions of the right thing, or, are they mere indicators of what is the right thing? The

difference between the two is whether or not the Oral Law is equally divine as the Written Law. If G-d exists, and He gave the Torah, and He further explained the Torah to Moshe, and we believe that Moshe did not change a single word or letter in the Torah or the teaching of the Torah, then we can accept that the oral explanation of the 613 Mitzvos absolutely defines the meaning of the right thing and the wrong thing.

Korach did not want to accept that the definition of the right thing and the wrong thing was dependent upon Moshe's explanation of G-d's commandments. Korach wanted to retain the right to personally define G-d's intentions and act accordingly. In dyeing the entire garment with Techeles, Korach indicated that he understood G-d's intention for giving the commandment of Tzitzis and was prepared to do even more than the "minimum".

Korach did not have to keep to the "letter of the law" because he felt that he understood the intent of the law. By filling his home with books of Torah Korach proclaimed his belief in the Written Law. What greater statement of personal belief than a lifetime devoted to the study of G-d's law? What more could a small scroll of parchment attached to the doorpost mean to G-d? G-d is not interested in form! G-d desires meaning and intent! Which is better, a home with a Mezuzah but no Chumash (bible), or a home with a well used Chumash but no Mezuzah?

Moshe's response was simple. "In the morning G-d will make known the one who is His own and whomever He will choose, He will draw close to Himself." It was not up to Moshe to defend G-d. Moshe could not prove his or Aharon's Divine appointment. It was not up to Moshe to prove the process that G-d had chosen for disseminating His expectations for humanity to humanity. The process was as it was ordained and Moshe fully trusted that G-d knew exactly what He was doing.

Korach's challenge attacked the most fundamental principle of Judaism. Who defines right and who defines wrong? Did G-d institute an "absolute" criterion for the right thing that would be subject to the whims and fancies of the greater or lesser intellects of every subsequent generation? Was the definition of truth and the right thing going to be dependent on an evolutionary process called "survival of the smartest?"

One of the arguments offered against Darwin's theory of evolution is the question, "If everything has evolved by relative chance from a lesser to a more complex organism what guarantees that the process will not reverse itself? Who is to say that we will not find ourselves living on "Planet of the Apes?"

From my limited experience I cannot tell you whether such a degeneration and reversal has or could ever occur. However, in the arena of intelligence and intellect I can assure you that there has never been a guarantee that the smartest will survive. Intellectual devolution (stupidity) happens all the time. In fact, our history suggests the opposite. If not for G-d's loving benevolence what would we be today? The transmission of the Oral Law from Moshe to today is predicated on the understanding that subsequent generations know less about G-d's intentions than the generations that preceded

them. Therefore, not only are there no guarantees for intellectual evolution, the facts suggest the opposite! Does it make sense that G-d would subject the world to a code of ever-changing morals and values?

Absolute truth is critical to our entire relationship with G-d and humanity. Those who argue for an ever-changing subjective moral code do so because they do not believe in the same G-d concept that I do. My G-d was and is capable of establishing unchanging, objective, absolute standards of right and wrong. My G-d, Who is all-knowing, unlimited, and eternal, gave a Torah that transcends the limitations of generations and circumstances. From G-d's perspective, "There is nothing new beneath the sun." The truth is as Moshe transcribed it in the Torah and as he taught and explained it to the Bnai Yisroel.

Korach's rebellion was the first of many. Throughout the generations the religious battle lines have been drawn on the pages of the Oral Law, not the Written. The Jews accepted the Torah with the words, "We will do and we then we will attempt to understand." Such a commitment could only be offered on the basis of absolute faith and trust in G-d and Moshe.

Those who truly believe in the first five Principles of Faith are able to follow the dictates and commandments inherent in the middle four Principles and to accept the consequences defined in the last four Principles. They embrace the absolute criterion for right and wrong as defined in the 613 Mitzvos and as taught by Moshe and all the subsequent teachers.

Trust must be modeled and taught. The transmission of Torah from generation to generation demands trust. The Talmud in Shabbos 31a records a discussion between Hillel and the Convert. The Convert stipulated that he would only trust Hillel regarding the divinity of the Written Law but not the divinity of the Oral Law. However, because the Convert did not know the Aleph Bet (Hebrew alphabet), Hillel had to first teach him how to read Hebrew so that he could teach him the Written Law. Pointing to the letters in the Torah Hillel taught him Aleph, Bet, Gimmel. The next day, Hillel pointed to the exxact same letters but reversed their names, Gimmel, Aleph, Bet. The Convert immediately confronted Hillel with the obvious contradiction between the lessons of the first and second days. Hillel responded, "Do you see that you have to trust me when I teach you the basics of reading? The same way that you must trust that I am teaching you the truth when I teach you how to read the Written Law, so too you must trust me that I am teaching you the truth when I teach you the Oral Law."

The moral of the story is obvious. There can never be knowledge without trust. Imagine a Pre 1A class that refuses to accept the accuracy of the alphabet being taught. Imagine if every student demanded that their teacher prove to them that what was being taught was the truth and not some made up personal mumbo jumbo! The entire educational system both formal and informal is predicated on trust.

The rebellion of Korach is the challenge of every generation. After all is said and done, after every

challenge is met and answered, the bottom line remains the same. Either we trust the truth of the Oral Law or we question the very foundation of our belief in G-d. Either we do as G-d commanded and as Moshe explained, or we do as we want, regardless of what G-d wishes. In more challenging terms, we choose to do either the right thing as defined by the absolutes of the Torah or we choose to do the wrong thing as defined by the absolutes of the Torah.

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