

INTENT SPEAKS LOUDER THAN ACTION

by Rabbi Aron Tendler

What is more important, intent or action? Is the reason why we do what we do more important or less important than the action itself? From a legal and social point of view action is more important than intent. This is not to suggest that intent doesn't have its place in society. Occasionally, intent, or the lack thereof, will affect the ruling or outcome of a judgment; however, for the most part society ignores intent and focuses on action. Intent aside, society rewards and punishes on the basis of action, not intent.

Intent is a complex set of variables often impossible to clarify or judge. Intellect and emotion weave an intricate tapestry of justification and rationalization that defies what should otherwise be the simplicity of right and wrong. Only G-d can truthfully factor intent into the judicial equation and during the High Holidays G-d is described in the liturgy as the "Choker Laiv - the One Who Investigates The Heart" - the only Judge Who can clearly factor intent into the equation of justice.

The Chovos Halivavos (Duties of The Heart) explains that the "Laiv - heart," not the "Moach - brain" is metaphorically used to describe the seat of human intellect. The brain suggests intellect divorced from emotion and the heart suggests emotion in the service of the intellect. The Choker Laiv, describes the One Who Investigates The Heart and is able to take intent into consideration when rendering justice.

In this week's Parsha, there is a definite emphasis on the intent behind the action. The Torah's account of the Mishkan's building campaign, the donations of precious materials, time, and talent is liberally punctuated by 14 grammatical constructions of the word Laiv - heart. For example: (35:5) "Everyone whose heart motivates him." (35:21) "Every man whose heart inspired him." (35:25) "Every wise-hearted woman." (35:26) "All women whose heart inspired them."

From the liberal usage of the word Laiv - heart as a criterion for the building of the Mishkan we see the Torah's focus on intent. Why? What difference did it make why a person gave his or her donation. The focus should have been on getting the Mishkan built in the most beautiful and expedient way possible. Whether the artist was the most righteous or the most unrighteous should not have made any difference. So long as their skill could translate concept into being should have been the only criteria and concern.

Imagine the Rabbi who appeals to his congregants for a building campaign saying, "Only those of you who really want to give money should do so." " I will only accept donations from those of you

who are giving for the right reasons." Buildings would not get built and Rabbis would be out of business. Why was intent so important in the construction of the Mishkan?

In 1942, Rav Dessler lectured the Gateshead Kollel on this very topic. His focus was not this week's Parsha or the building of the Mishkan. The focus of his Shiur was to explain the importance of intent in the performance of Mitzvos. (Strive for Truth, Part Two, The Mitzvos of the heart. pg. 86-94)

Rav Dessler explains that all actions are preceded by some degree of intent, whether conscious or not. Some times intent translates into action and other times not. If the intent is positive, Chazal (the Rabbis) tell us that G-d credits us and rewards us even if the intent never translated into action. On the other hand, if the intent is negative and circumstances do not allow for it to actualize, G-d does not hold it against us. He does not punish for intent alone.

The truth is that G-d should punish and reward us for our intentions. Intent is more closely akin to the spiritual realm than action. Actions are physical and limited; thoughts are ethereal and expansive. In the spiritual realm the focus cannot be on action. Circumscribed physical actions have no relationship to the unlimited world of the spirit. Intent and thoughts are the only medium that can bridge the physical and the spiritual. (Chovos Halivavos)

In fact, thoughts are far more within our control than our actions and therefore more deserving of reward and punishment. Allow me to explain. Actions depend upon circumstances; intentions depend upon us. Whether or not any given intent will ever come into fruition depends upon incalculable circumstances working in concert with each other. Intentions only depend upon the level of our moral and spiritual discipline. In other words, it depends upon us.

Rav Dessler explains the statement, (Yoma 29a) "Thoughts of a sin are worse than the sin itself," as follows. A sin is an action that is circumscribed and contained. Do Teshuvah (repentance) and the sin is forgiven. The negative action is offset by the positive action of penance. However, the action originated in an intent that is rooted in the heart of the sinner. The action may be corrected but the evil root still remains. Uprooting the evil root is far more difficult than doing penance for the sin. Therefore, Chazal said, "Thoughts of a sin are worse than the sin itself." Therefore, the fact that G-d only punishes us for our actions and not our intentions is an expression of His kindness and benevolence.

The same is true for positive thoughts and the desire and intent to do Mitzvos. The outcome of the intent may not be within our control. That depends upon G-d Who controls the universe. However, the thought and intent behind the desire depends on us. Therefore, G-d credits us for a positive intent and desire as if it had been actualized into action.

The organization of the Ten Commandments also proves that intent is the most important component in our relationship with G-d. The commentaries explain the commandments as sequentially advancing from thought (1&2) to action (3-9) to thought (10) with the final commandment representing the highest order of service to G-d. They begin with Belief in G-d

(thought) and then advance the practical application of that concept into religious, familial and social practices (action). Finally, the Ten Commandments culminates with, "Do not covet..." (thought)

It would appear that the person who wishes to be G-dly, a true servant of G-d, must advance to the point where he does not even desire that which is not his. He must reach the level where he does not even have the intent or desire to sin!

This week's Parsha begins with the Mitzvah of Shabbos followed by an accounting of the construction of the Mishkan (Tabernacle). Rashi quoted the Mechilta that explains the relationship between the two. "The Torah preceded the accounting of the Mishkan with the Mitzvah of Shabbos to teach us that the building of the Mishkan does not take precedent over keeping the Shabbos."

Shabbos proclaims G-d's mastery and dominion over both nature and society. The Mishkan represents G-d's divine presence, the Shechina, dwelling in the midst of the Jewish nation. I would like to suggest that the two institutions, Shabbos and the Mishkan, help us attain the level of intent in the service of G-d, not just action in the service of G-d.

The Mishkan was created with action while Shabbos is celebrated with intent. The commandment to build the Mishkan stated, (35:10) "Every wise hearted among you... come and make everything that G-d has commanded." Shabbos on the other hand is respected through inaction, by not doing action (labor). (35:2) "For six days you are to labor, however on the seventh day... whoever does work shall be put to death." Aside from the scheduled activities of Shabbos (prayers, Kiddush, Challah, Torah study, spending time with family) which are mostly not specified in the Torah, Shabbos is celebrated with inaction. We are not permitted to do creative labor. (cooking, carrying, making fire, building, planting etc.) If the primary "keeping of the Sabbath" is not doing various actions, then the real appreciation of Shabbos must be in the reason and intent for not doing those things on Shabbos.

The building of the Mishkan represents the six days of the week when we dominate the physical world through our actions. They are six days during which we serve G-d's purpose through our actions. Shabbos on the one hand, represents the completed Mishkan, the intent and goal of all the labor leading up to that moment. Just as all the workmanship and labor in constructing the Mishkan was to build the Mishkan, so too the intent and goal of the six days of labor is for the sake of having Shabbos. The intent of constructing the Mishkan was to have a physical building wherein which G-d's presence would be manifest. Once the Mishkan was built and G-d's presence was manifest there was no reason to labor any further. Likewise, once Shabbos arrives there is no reason to labor anymore. The physical action that we do during the six days of the week should be directed by our intent to attain the spiritual passivity of Shabbos.

The Mishkan representing the physical manifestation of our service to G-d (offerings, prayers, etc.) was formed through the limited physical resources and talents of the people. However, G-d and Moshe insisted that those limited resources be motivated by the proper intent. The physical Mishkan would represent the intent of its builders. If their intentions were selfish, the Mishkan would

memorialize human limitations and avarice. If their intentions were noble and G-dly the Mishkan would represent the Shechina dwelling within the nation. Therefore, the insistence was on Laiv - heart. The focus was on the intent. The action was only a representation and actualization for that intent.

However, in order to underscore the focus and intent of G-d's commandment to build the Mishkan, G-d first commanded the nation to keep the Shabbos. The message could not be any clearer. The importance of the Mishkan was not in the physical beauty and majesty of its construction. The beauty and importance of the Mishkan was in the desire and intent of the nation to be close to their G-d and live by His laws.

The Four Parshios

Practically speaking, Shabbos was the one-day during the week when the community gathered. Therefore, the Rabbis chose Shabbos as the most opportune time to make timely Halachik and communal announcements. Associating these announcements with a Torah portion is indicative of the focus that each of us is supposed to have in regards to integrating Hashem (G-d) into our lives. These announcements were not simply relegated to a public pronouncement or a few lines on a sheet, but were associated with the reading and the study of Torah.

There are four special Shabbosim preceding Pesach when additional portions from the Torah are read. Set rules determine when each of these additional Parshios is to be read.

Parshas Shekalim, the first of the special Shabbosim preceding Pesach, is read on the Shabbos that precedes the month of Adar, or the Shabbos of Rosh Chodesh Adar (when Rosh Chodesh and Shabbos coincide). Parshas Zachor is read on the Shabbos before Purim. Parshas Parah is read on the Shabbos before the Shabbos of Parshas Hachodesh. Parshas Hachodesh is read on the Shabbos before the month of Nissan or the Shabbos of Rosh Chodesh Nissan (when Rosh Chodesh and Shabbos coincide).

Shekalim

A key function of the Bais Hamikdash was the offerings of the daily, Korban Tzibur - communal offerings. The designation of "communal" was because every male adult, 20 years and older, donated a ½ shekel toward the purchase of the daily communal offerings. (Inherent in the concept of the ½ shekel and the communal offerings was the importance of family units, not individuals.) These monies were gathered and used to purchase the daily sacrifices. The law requires that all offerings must be purchased from monies collected for that year. The fiscal year for public offerings was from Nissan to Nissan. Therefore, the Rabbi's ordained that the portion of the Torah (Ki Tisa) describing the first collection of the ½ shekel be read on the Shabbos of or before Rosh Chodesh Adar, one month before the ½ shekel was due, as a reminder that everyone should send in their money.

Copyright © 2003 by Rabbi Aron Tandler and Project Genesis, Inc.

The author is Rabbi of Shaarey Zedek Congregation, Valley Village, CA.
