

GOD'S COMMANDMENTS: THE KEY TO A HEALTHIER JEWISH SOCIETY

by Rabbi Berel Wein

As we all know, the word "tzav" implies command, mandated instruction. The word and its inherent concept is the foundation of Jewish law and ritual observance. In our blessing over the performance of an act of our ritual we state that we have been commanded - v'tizvanu - regarding its performance. The Hebrew word that is commonly and popularly used for the performance of a good deed is mitzvah - again from the root of the Hebrew word that implies command.

Of course each and every one of us has the power of free choice to perform mitzvot or not. But when performing a mitzvah, we should be aware that its performance is in accordance with God's commandment to us and not purely out of the goodness of one's heart and/or the logic of one's mind. Though there is much emotional feeling present in Judaism, it is not an emotionally-based faith.

The commandment aspect of Judaism helps us operate correctly in life even when the proper emotion and/or logic is temporarily absent at the moment of decision - whether to do the good deed or refrain from acting wrongly. The nature of human beings from infancy onwards is to resent and even reject authority.

Yet the Torah describes Jews as being God's servants, subject to His commands and value system. It states clearly that though we are free people and have the options of all choices in life, we are not to abuse that freedom of choice. God has the right to command us and His commandments form the basis of Jewish life and behavior. We are a religion of behavior and actions as much as one of knowledge, study and intellect.

The parsha teaches us that our public servants are also subject to Heavenly command and instruction. Aharon and his sons forever after him perform their public service in the Mishkan/Temple according to God's command and not necessarily in consonance with their own understanding of current fashion or correctness.

We will be witness in the coming parsha of the tragic consequences that befell two of Aharon's sons when they substituted their personal judgments regarding proper and meaningful ritual for the commandments they were ordered to fulfill.

Jewish history is replete with the ruins of those individuals and groups who ignored the idea of

command and substituted their own definitions of Judaism for that of the Almighty. An even cursory view of Jewish life and society today certainly bears witness to the tragedies of a Jewish society that has abandoned this core idea, of being a people commanded by Heaven to live a certain life style and to remain steadfast in its divinely derived value system.

The past centuries have shown much of the Jewish world to behave like the rebellious adolescent - contemptuous of its elders and convinced of its omniscience and omnipotence. The way back to a healthier Jewish society is through the restoration of the value of authority and command in our personal and national lives. It is the old that is really relevant and new and can revive and inspire us all.

Shabat shalom, Rabbi Berel Wein

Rabbi Berel Wein- Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com