

"AND HE HAS COMMANDED US"

by Rabbi Berel Wein

The entire thrust of Torah life lies in the word tzav which informs us as the title of the parsha of this week. Tzav means command, order, instruct. It allows little leeway for individual creativity in the performance of ritual and commandments.

The values of Torah life come with an instruction manual. And just as the wonderful gadgets of technology in our lives require adherence to the manual that accompanies each device, in order for it to operate effectively, so too the Torah in the spiritual realm of Judaism requires adherence to specific instructions.

It is not for naught that any and all of the blessings that were composed by the rabbis to be recited before the performance of a mitzvah contains the word v'tzivanu - and He has commanded us, for the word mitzvah itself, which we usually translate in terms of being a good deed, literally means something which has been commanded.

It is this recognition of being commanded, of following the instruction manual of the Torah in a committed and punctilious fashion that defines Judaism throughout the ages. In today's world there are many who seek to "improve" upon the Torah. They have written a new and ever changing manual of instructions using such sweet sounding terms as "relevant" "progressive" "attractive" to describe prayer services, Torah commandments and Jewish values.

The fault line in Jewish life today remains as it always has been this acceptance or rejection of the concept of v'tzivanu. But Jewish history teaches us that none of this tinkering with that concept survives the passage of time and the ever changing mores of human society. It is only the old instructional manual that still stands and preserves us after all else has passed from the scene.

The concept of v'tzivanu rubs us the wrong way. We are by nature rebellious against authority imposed upon us by others. From infancy onward we demand to do it all by ourselves, when and how we wish. Therefore we can sense what the rabbis meant when they said that the people of Israel accepted the Torah at Mount Sinai and they felt that the mountain hung over their heads as a terrible and forced burden.

Here they were going to be commanded to do things a certain exact way, to make the Torah's values supreme over their own personal desires, logic and way of life. But they were warned then that abandoning the Torah and not following the instructional manual would bring personal and national problems, tragedies, defections and harsh judgments.

The mountain still hangs over our heads as we are witness to this fact in so many facets of our lives. So again we are brought full circle to the idea of tzav and v'tzivanu. The concept of tzav as promulgated in this week's parsha is not addressed solely to Aaron and his descendants but it is part of the heritage of Judaism for all Jews and for all who wish to witness Jewish continuity in their families and the Jewish people as a whole.

Shabat shalom. Purim sameach

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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