

PRIORITIES: NOTHING IS SMALL

by Rabbi Berel Wein

Rashi, in commenting on the first word of this week's parsha, employs an interpretation of the word eikev, which in the context of the verse itself means "since" or "because." It usually denotes a cause and effect relationship - because you will observe God's commandments, then blessings and physical rewards will descend upon you. Rashi, however, based on midrash, expands the meaning of the word eikev and uses an alternative meaning of the word, meaning "foot" or "heel."

He comments that there are commandments and values in Jewish Torah life that the Jews somehow take lightly. They grind them into the dust of everyday life by stepping upon them with their foot and/or heel. It is these, so to speak, neglected commandments and values that are the true key for spiritual success and a good life. Rashi emphasizes to us that the choice of the word eikev, in the beginning verse of the parsha, is not merely a literary issue of vocabulary. Rather, in the choice of that word, the Torah is teaching us the valuable lesson of life that there really are no small things or inconsequential acts.

The rabbis in Avot taught us to be careful with "light" commandments just as we are justly careful with more stringent and weighty commandments. The rabbis emphasize that one does not know the true effect of the observance of these "light" commandments in the reward and punishment scheme of the judgment of Heaven. So the Torah in effect teaches us to watch our step and actions lest our heel unintentionally treads upon a holy commandment and/or value.

It is difficult for us to measure differing values and the weight and worth of any of the commandments of the Torah. In cases of conflicting values and contradictory instructions, the halachic process resolves for us what our behavior and action should be. Yet, on an intellectual and spiritual plane, we are always faced with decisions regarding our priorities of behavior and action.

I am attempting to muster some semblance of intent and devotion in my recitation of the prayers when a poor man shoves his hands in front of my face demanding that I give him some money. What shall I do? Shall I ignore the poor man and attempt somehow to regain my devotional intent in prayer or shall I abandon the prayer and grant a coin to the beggar? Which value shall I tread upon with my heel?

We are faced with such a type of dilemma on a regular daily basis. Somehow if we can balance our priorities and not subject any of them to be ground under our heels, great things can be accomplished. And even if we are unable to actualize such a balance, the recognition of the

potentially conflicting values and actions - the realization that one is not ever to judge God's commandments as being light and heavy, important and less important - is itself a great step toward true spirituality and an understanding of Judaism.

In the American Revolutionary War there was a famous colonial flag that proclaimed: "Don't Tread On Me!" In effect, this is the message of the Torah regarding observance of commandments and our attitude towards Torah and tradition.

Shabbat shalom

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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