

An eclectic mix of mitzvot

HOW often do we do things without knowing the reason for them? I remember visiting a beautiful primary school and noticing that when the children were in the corridor, they talked, joked and laughed but when they went onto the stairwell, they proceeded in silence. There were signs at the top and bottom of all stairs instructing “Silence on the Stairs”.

I asked the principal why this rule existed. She smiled and said: “I never thought about it. It’s just what we do.”

There are many things that, as Jews, we just “do”. We follow the Ten Commandments, we support our beautiful Jewish homeland in Israel, we study Torah, we affix mezuzot to our doorposts and we recite the prayer Shema. All of these appear in this week’s parashah, “Va’etchanan”.

In fact, the instruction to recite the Shema is found twice in this parashah. Very many Jews know at least the first sentence of the Shema by heart and many know at least the first paragraph. But how many of us actually mean what we say when we say prayers such as the Shema?

Prayers act as a stabilising force in the rough-and-tumble of life and the familiar; reassuring mutterings bring about spiritual contentment for many. However, the prophet Isaiah warned us about this: “And

Torah topic

ואתחנן — נחמו

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God said: ‘Because this people has come near; with their mouth and with their lips they honour Me, but their heart they draw far away from Me, and their fear of Me has become a command of people, which has been taught.’ (Isaiah 29:3)

Isaiah was worried that rote learning and thoughtless recitation was dangerous for the future of the Jewish people. Meaningless actions, he angsted, are just that – meaningless.

For others, saying Shema without kavanah (devotion) is better than not saying it. For many of us, mitzvot (commandments) such as Shema anchor us to the Jewish people, connect us with generations past and future, and affirm publicly the supremacy of God and therefore the moral code that is found in the Torah.

This week’s parashah is an eclectic mix of mitzvot. It commands us to say things, do things, think things. Maybe it is trying to find different access points for each of us, recognising that we are all different. It begins with an acclamation by Moses that recent events have been incredible: “What power is there in the heaven

or on the earth that can perform according to Your deeds and according to Your mighty acts?” (Devarim 3:24). Moses then asks to cross into the Land of Israel but God became angry with him “because of you”.

This last phrase is one of the keys to the parashah. The origins of divine anger are in Man, but so are the origins of divine approval. “Now O Israel, listen to the decrees and to the ordinances that I teach you to perform, so that you may live” (Devarim 4:1).

Judaism means different things to different people. For some it is the physical acts of mezuzah while for others it is the verbal act of prayer. For some it is the settlement of Israel while for others it is observing Shabbat. As a community we are healthy when we recognise the Judaism that is found in each of us. The challenge for each of us is not to be passive but rather to engage with individuals, movements and organisations that speak to each of us, differently, and to tolerate and celebrate the mosaic that is found in our community, without judgement.

For a parashah full of mitzvot, it is a reminder that regarding Judaism: “etz chaim he l’machazikim ba – it is a tree of life for those who grasp it.”

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