

It happened again this week. I was standing with several congregants and in the course of the conversation one of them said, 'Oh I'll take care of that on Saturday.' There was a pregnant pause and then this person turned to me and said, 'Sorry, Rabbi.'

Now I know that I am one of the very few people in the congregation who observe any of the *hukkim*. These are the laws that don't seem to have a logical reason for them, like *Shabbat* or *Kashrut*. I know most of our members don't follow them and you know I know that most of our members don't follow them. So I never understand why people think it's necessary to apologize to me when that comes up in conversation. I always wonder if they are really sorry, why they don't just follow the mitzvot. I really do know the answer to that question but I just want to put this subject out for us to examine a little bit.

I don't want to be in the position of judge and jury for anyone. Of course I would love to see everybody in CSI observing all the laws that we have. It would make for a deeper feeling of connection among us and lead to wonderful conversations about how our laws have been given, received and followed. But I'm more realistic than that. What I would suggest instead is for everybody to observe those laws that are meaningful to them and to add new observances when that makes sense.

I also understand something about how people make their choices about observance. I haven't always obeyed the laws of *Shabbat* or *Kashrut*. At one point as I was learning more about Judaism, I tried to find a rational explanation for our non-rational laws so then I could argue my way out of them.

For example, I would say that the laws of *Kashrut* were created because there were very few ways to keep food fresh 3000 or even 100 years ago. We were then commanded not to eat foods, like shell fish and pork that were known to cause disease. But, I would argue, that is no longer the case. Since we have refrigeration, we can simply keep all of our foods at the right temperature, therefore, we can eat whatever we want. It seemed very simple to me at the time.

But the more I studied our religion, the more I realized that the only reason to follow the *hukkim* is to be able to stay as conscious as possible in all of our actions and to be as consciously connected to God as possible.

When I came home from the hospital in December, my friend, Betty stayed with me. She did not keep kosher in her own home but there she was in my home acting as chief cook and bottle washer. She very quickly realized how much consciousness it took to navigate her way around my kitchen.

She stayed with me for only four days but even after she had been back home for a week, she still found herself questioning every utensil, dish, pot or pan she picked up even though she no longer had to do that. She said, it was the most conscious she ever been in her kitchen. That is exactly the reason to keep kosher: so that we can be conscious and consciously connected to God while we are preparing our meals.

This week's portion gives us the origin of our *Kashrut* laws, 'Do not boil a kid in its mother's milk.' [Shmot 23:19] While our Sages have expanded our *kashrut* laws well beyond this one verse, they tell us that even this verse impels us to be conscious about relationships. If we boil a kid in its own mother's milk, we are disrespecting the relationship the mother has with her offspring.

We also find in our portion in Chapter 24:3. "And Moses came and told the people all the words of Adonai, and all the judgments; and all the people answered with one voice. And they said, 'All the words which Adonai has said, *na'aseh ve-nishmah*, we will do and we will understand.'"

It is odd for us to do something before we understand it. But regarding Jewish law, we are not supposed to ask why; we are expected to obey because God said to do it. Then as we continue to practice each mitzvah, we see how it works in our lives. It changes our understanding of our simplest actions and then it changes our understanding of our relationship to our religion and our relationship to God.

In this way action leads to insight. Or we could also say that action leads to excellence. In the new bestseller, 'Outliers,' by Malcolm Gladwell, we learn that success is not just dictated by talent alone but by luck and by practice. Gladwell says that there is a 10,000 hour rule. This is the amount of time we must spend doing something to become an expert at it. Living in the era of speed, we tend to want to be good at something very quickly and if we are not, then we stop doing it and move on to something else. But Gladwell and Judaism tell us that in order to be really good at something, to understand the intricacies of any subject, we must first practice, practice, practice.

I encourage everybody to imagine taking on some of the mitzvot of *Shabbat* and *Kashrut*. Maybe not eating pork and shell fish; maybe not mixing milk and meat together; maybe choosing not to go shopping on *Shabbat* until 4 or 5 in the afternoon. If we give ourselves time on Shabbat without planning anything to do, we could choose to spend that with our family or with a good book or just having time to sit and reflect. If we each took on one new mitzvah each week or each month, we would become more aware of how we live our lives, of how we relate to others and of what God means to us. *Na'ash v'nishma*, we will do and we will create a better life for ourselves and all of those around us.

Shabbat Shalom.