

Scholars of Jewish Law have been concerned with the problem of what a [person] should or should not do. At the center is the deed, they have said. Philosophers and *Kabbalists* have debated what a [person] should or should not think. *Hasidim* have chiefly been absorbed by the problem of how a [person] should think while acting. Their first premise has been that what one thinks while acting determines the quality of religious life.

This assertion—that what goes on in one's inner life is of decisive importance—came as a shock to the stalwart guardians of tradition. Had they not always taught that the essence of Jewish living was in the doing? That inwardness, good intentions were desirable but not indispensable? Was it not an established principle that the value of good deeds remained unimpaired, even when devoid of good intentions?...

In defiance of this long-accepted view, the Hasidim proclaimed that intention was of the essence. What a person thought and felt was not simply an adjunct to good deeds, a decorative jewel that lent luster and beauty but constituted the very core of living. One had to develop a variety of sensibilities, a capacity to rise to higher levels of awareness. At times an inner experience had to take place so that the deed could follow...

The compelling originality of the *Baal Shem Tov*, [18th century founder of *Hasidism*] was apparent in his perspective on Jewishness and Jews. While others judged a person in terms of his actions, the Baal Shem saw him in relation to the whole personality. Nobility of character was as important to him as piety. Without intending to downgrade acts of goodness, he reaffirmed that their purpose was to enhance the quality of a [person's] being...

[Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel in *A Passion for Truth*, pp. 42-4]

We are accustomed to say that unlike most religions, Judaism is based on actions and not on faith. And that is true. We can be completely observant Jews and not believe in God. We simply have to obey and live by the laws. Even though belief in God was a given in the lives of Jews until the Enlightenment, it was never required by Jewish law. And we can take some comfort in this. We know how hard it is to keep anything like perfect faith. And so knowing that we are required only to act correctly gives us the room we need to be a Jew and not think much about having the proper intention in our actions.

But there is a problem in this stance. *Ramban*, 13th century commentator in Spain, tells us that it is completely possible to follow all the laws of our religion and at the same time not be a righteous person. In fact *Ramban*, in his commentary on '*K'doshim Tihiyu*' 'And you must be holy,' [Vayikra 19:2] argues that *halakhah* does not automatically require the experience of holiness or even the intention for holiness. In talking about this concept, *Ramban* gives us the term '*naval birshut haTorah*,' a disgusting person who nevertheless behaves exactly according to the laws of *halakhah*. *Ramban* goes on to say that all of us should attempt to be '*Iekadesh atzmecha bamittar lakh*, to sanctify ourselves by not acting in ways that are not legally prohibited by Jewish law but are considered disgusting, for example sloppiness in eating or cursing.

What *Ramban* says is not exactly the same as the *Baal Shem Tov's* perspective but we can see how they blend together. The *Baal Shem Tov* says it is our job as Jews

not so much to observe our laws but to embody the behaviors and attitudes of holy and righteous people. He says the way to do that is to embody spiritual *kavannah*, the intention to be as holy as possible whenever we act. In that way we are more easily guided to take the right action.

Ramban's understanding adds that even people, who observe every one of the laws perfectly, can be considered disgusting when some of their actions do not include the desire to be righteous beyond the given laws.

It is so important for us to remember that the intention with which we act can say more than what we do. If people see us acting correctly but with a sense of arrogance or disrespect for others, our actions will not matter. It's much harder to be vigilant both in our actions and in our feelings but only through doing that can we really claim to be good Jews, to be a part of God's people.

Shabbat Shalom.