

A Year of Encompassing Torah



Prepared by
Rabbi Steven J. Rubenstein
Temple B'nai Abraham
Beverly, MA
Rabbioli.Steven@verizon.net

Parashat Tetzaveh

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This is how we shall accrue our mitzvah points:

**Barukh atah Adonai,
Eloheinu Melekh ha-Olam,
Asher kidishanu b'mitzvotav
v'tzivanu la'asok b'divrei torah...**

**Praised are You Adonai, our God,
The Sovereign of all worlds,
Who has made us holy with your mitzvot,
And commanded us to engage ourselves
with words of torah.**

***To be fully engaged with Torah
Is to wrestle with Torah –
To challenge our tradition while loving it,
To question it while celebrating it.***

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**An Added Blessing
For Spiritual Direction**

*"Yihyu l'ratzon imrey fi v'higion libi
lifaneycha Hashem Tzuri v'Go'ali*

May the expressions of my mouth
and **the thoughts of my heart**
find favor before You, G-d,
my Rock and my Redeemer."

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Parashat Tetzaveh 5768

A couple of weeks ago I spoke to a couple of groups asking them to come up with a list of rules that we as parents place upon our children, who then pass the same rules onto the next generation. A half hour later and three pages full of phrases that our parents repeated often we then explored the reasons why the burdened us with so many rules and how that related to the Torah portion Mishpatim and its 52 rules, give or take a few. What we discovered is that many of the rules that are repeated by our parents are meant to show us how much they love us and wish to keep us safe, even when they are no longer around to remind us of life's many lessons. One of the rules that emerged from our conversation was "do as I say and not as I do". As parents we end up doing certain things that we are not proud of, out of a perceived necessity. However, it is something that we wish our children will not have to face in their own lives. In thinking about this particular part of parenting, I find myself delving deeper into my own motivations for wishing my children to be better *mentches* than myself. This week's Torah reading has helped me in clarifying my thinking when I considered how many times God commands Moses in constructing the Mishkan, the box that will eventually contain the written form of those commandments that were presented to Moses on Mount Sinai.

No less than eighteen times we read "As God commanded Moses..." As we know, when the Torah repeats something it is with a specific reason in mind. One could ask, "Why doesn't the author wait until the end of the narration to make his statement? Why does he have to repeat his point so often?" I am sure that my daughters would say the same thing each time I speak to them and they question "why" and I finish the conversation with "because I say so!" When I tell them to do something it is with the expectation that they do it "exactly as I tell them

to do it." When *you* are the boss there is no room for deviation or for creativity and ingenuity.

I hope that they do not think that I do not appreciate their desire for independence. Nor is it a factor of trust. We all have been there. As adults, some of us are still in that same place – when it comes to our parents or to our boss at home or even at work. "So as you are told!" I once added some items to the grocery list while substituting other things that were on the list. Never again will I do that – because no one wants to make two trips to the grocery store involuntarily! When you love someone that much, you learn from your lesson. So it is with God. Heaven forbid the person who questions what God asks of us, saying to God, "Why don't we do it this way instead of your way, God? I think that this will improve things!" When it came time to put a rudder on the ark, Noah questioned God's design plans, and we all know the results of that discussion...

It is a part of human nature to want a sense of independence in this world. None of us like to be told what to do and how to do it – not as free thinking adults and certainly not as teenagers and to some degree as young adults. We all think that we are entitled to do things our own way, as long as it gets done in the end. We live in a society and an era when we promote individuality, because it distinguishes who we are from others. What the Torah comes to teach us is that there is an inherent danger in thinking along those terms. While it is important for each of us to be true to ourselves and our inner being, when it comes to observing the mitzvot, it is important that there be a sense of unity of purpose and execution. Several times in the Torah God instructs the Israelites not to sway from the path that He has set out for them, neither to the left nor to the right, despite the poet Robert Frost's invitation to take the path less taken. We somehow feel that when we are following orders we become like a slave or a servant to those who boss over us, and in doing so we no longer honor God with our actions because they become "fixed in nature," (*keva*) rote, rather than with "*kavannah*," by directing the heart in the right place.

What I have discovered in my journey down this same path in recent days is that there is something to be learned by doing things in a fixed way. Athletes will tell you that they become better only through repetition combined

with hard work and determination, and a certain amount of skill. However, it is the practice that makes things perfect! The sages of the Talmud testify to that understanding when the sages proclaimed, "greater is the one who is commanded AND does, than the one who is NOT commanded and does." (Tractate Bava Kama 38a) Rabbi Yissocher Frand notes in his weekly d'var torah that this thought is counter-intuitive because we praise the person who acts independently before acknowledging the person who does the same thing through expectation of that individual. In other words, a volunteer gets more credit for doing the same thing that an employee does. Such a person sits at a higher plane of spirituality because he or she enjoys acting in this way without obligation of reward or compensation.

But this is not the case in the eyes of God. Rather, we should reward the employee for doing what is expected of him, for doing what he is told to do, and that this is the higher plane of spirituality. Doing what the boss says is the more difficult path in life. Doing what God says is equally difficult, in the same way that following exactly what a parent tells you to do is the hardest lesson to learn in life. "What do our parents know!?! Things were a lot simpler when they were my age!..."

Eighteen times, God repeats His words, "Do as I say..." Although we hate to admit it when we are wrong, most times our parents were right when they told us to do something their way. To them, it WAS a big deal when we listened and followed through on the things that they taught us. There is something to be said about the person who dedicates himself or herself to doing something in a ritualistic manner, day in and day out, year after year, without deviation. Now that I have been blessed with children – just like me – I must give thanks to my own parents AND to my God for your constant reminders regarding the rules you set before me. May they both continue to command from me my love and respect for guiding me along the right path, for that is their nature, and their reminders to come back when I have strayed to follow my own way.

