

Bringing Intentionality to Everything We Do

Rabbi Josh Blass

Mashgiach Ruchani, Yeshiva University

Work-life balance is one of the more popular topics in the self-help genre. The modern workplace demands a certain degree of commitment that competes with our other goals in life. For the Jew in this setting, this balance can be even trickier. Not only is work competing for our time, but the workplace setting often pairs us with people with different values and interests who might pressure us to be more like them. How does someone who might have spent years studying in the pristine halls of religious institutions enter the workplace and maintain his/her Jewish identity without compromising on the values we hold dear? How do we avoid becoming part of the culture that surrounds us? How do we remain distinct when the expectation is that we should be like everyone else?

It goes without saying that there are many different avenues that we can take in thinking about this issue. Perhaps the most obvious one is what our Hagaddah states, “*melamed shehayu Yisrael metzuyananim sham*” — this teaches that the Jewish people were distinct there. According to several commentators, this means that the Jewish people did not adopt certain aspects of Egyptian culture. This idea speaks to the necessity of carving out our own Torah driven personality no matter where we find ourselves.

With that being said, I would like to take a somewhat different approach to this issue.

There is a lengthy discussion in the rishonim and acharonim about the question of searching for and formulating reasons for mitzvah observance. The Rambam, primarily in the *Moreh Nevuchim* (3rd chelek, chapters 25-49) and in a few places in the *Mishneh Torah* (*Hilchos Tefillah* 9:6, *Hilchos Me'ilah* 8:8), serves as the flag bearer for this most important of issues. The Rambam's basic thesis is three-fold. The first is that every mitzvah has a reason it was mandated, and that often the mitzvah is to address either a historical, sociological, medical, or communal reality or issue. The second is that we should actively try to explore the potential reasons for the mitzvah. The third is that even when we don't know or can't comprehend the reason for the mitzvah, the commandment is still unquestionably binding by dint of the fact that it is the *tzivui Hashem* — the commandment of G-d.

Not far behind the Rambam in his eloquence and devotion to this topic is the Ramban. In a lengthy exposition (*Devarim* 22:6), the Ramban quotes the Rambam and instead posits that the purpose of every mitzvah is not that Hashem in some way needs or demands certain behaviors, but rather that the mitzvos exist *letzaref es habriyos* — to refine man. Simply stated, we are affected by everything we do and hence the mitzvos exist to refine, develop, and purify our actions, heart, speech, mind and interactions. Every mitzvah, every halacha in the Shulchan Aruch helps to create the *homo religiosus* with all of our elevated grandeur and refinement reflected in that phrase.

This idea highlights how mankind is fundamentally sensitive and impressionable. This is reflected

in many sources including in a fascinating comment by the *Tiferes Yisroel*. The Mishna at the end of *Kiddushin* (4:14) records that even the worthiest of slaughterers (*shochtim*) are like partners with Amalek. The *Tiferes Yisroel* comments:

שותפו של עמלק. דמדעוסק כל היום בשפיכת דמים, מתאכזר בטבעו כעמלק שלחם בישראל, לא לנחל ארצם גם לא לקחת ממונם ... רק בגאותו התפקר באכזריות חמה להשחית עם עני ודל.

A partner of Amalek. Since he spends the whole day spilling blood, he becomes naturally accustomed to cruelty, like Amalek, who fought the Jewish people, not to take their land or their money ... rather in its haughtiness, it engaged in heated cruelty to destroy an impoverished nation.

The slaughterer, due to the fact that he is involved all day in bloodshed, automatically instills cruelty into his nature similar to the nation of Amalek. Man is fundamentally a sensitive being and is affected by every environment, deed, feeling, and thought. Mitzvos are there to elevate every piece of our essence.

However, therein lies the rub. We are instructed to be sensitive, caring, and refined beings and to achieve that, we perform actions that are geared toward that refinement. Yet we observe that many Torah observant Jews may be missing many of the qualities that their actions in the form of mitzvos were supposed to cultivate. Why are the sifrei Nevi'im replete with admonitions of personal behavior? Much in the way that a *shochet's* potential cruelty is a direct result of the action of slaughtering, shouldn't we assume that a life of Torah observance ipso facto breeds an elevated person? Why is that often not the case? If the whole purpose

of mitzvos is *letzarefes habriyos*, shouldn't they automatically refine those who perform them?

The answer seems to be that we stand between two dialectical poles. On the one hand, we have the transformative and cosmic experience of mitzvah observance. On the other hand, we must constantly contend with our natural impulses that are often not refined, along with the basic reality of *mitzvos anashim melumadah* (Yeshayahu 29:13) — which means that all behaviors can become rote and devoid of meaning. A meaningful act can often shrink in the face of habit, drudgery and just basic *middos gruos* (negative character traits).

Are mitzvos transformative? Absolutely. Do we affirm the fundamental tenet that the commandments are effective in being *l'tzarefes habriyos*? Also absolutely. What is clear, though, is that those realities do not suffice by themselves. Mitzvah observance needs to come with a certain intentionality and mindfulness so that the acts are purposeful and transformative and not simply hollow. That is the connotation of being an *eved Hashem* — the recognition that this life that we have the privilege of living requires genuine work. The deeds themselves require effort and just as significant is the intentionality and framework that informs those deeds.

This leads back to our original question. While the issues and tensions that I alluded to before are not perfected by being in a yeshiva environment, the halls of a beis medrash or a seminary theoretically create an environment that emphasizes intentionality, *kavanah* and purpose of actions. A person, if so inclined, can find a minyan in which

time and energy are brought to one's tefillos. The messages of the study hall and the emphasis on personal growth bring attention to these most important issues. Just recently in the beis medrash at Yeshiva, we started an initiative in which the students (and Rebbeim) would be conscious of all of their behavior around food. How one walks to the dining room, the speed with which one eats, the mindfulness of where the food originated from, the concentration on the blessing that comes out of our mouths are all points of emphasis in a place in which personal growth is the *raison d'être* of the institution.

That intentionality simply is far more difficult and somewhat elusive when a person is just going and running and often simply trying to get by. There is an incredible and highly impressive level of effort to get up in the morning, get to minyan, spend a long day at work, try to get some learning in, be involved in the community, all while trying to be a present and attentive parent and spouse. It is an accomplishment to just fulfill all or part of the above list. The question is: are we also able to spiritually thrive in environments that are not always conducive to such? Are we able to bring intentionality and mindfulness to the actions that in and of themselves are impressive and meaningful? Are we able to not just perform mitzvos but to have them continue to transform every act, thought, word and feeling? To some degree it is that capacity to bring intentionality to our lives that allows us to be a redeemed and elevated people no matter where life's journeys take us. In a way, the capacity to carve out this type of space is the highest and most exalted level of freedom.

Where Everybody Has a Name

Dr. Erica Brown

*Vice Provost for Values and Leadership
Director, Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks-
Herenstein Center for Values and
Leadership*

We begin Sefer Shemot with a list of names that are highly familiar to readers. It is these names that give the entire book its name: "These are the names of the sons of Israel who came to Egypt with Jacob, each coming with his household: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah; Issachar, Zebulun, and Benjamin; Dan and Naphtali, Gad and Asher" (Ex. 1:1-4). It is odd to include information that is patently obvious to any reader of the previous Biblical book. The narrative continues its curious introduction: "The total number of persons that were of Jacob's issue came to seventy, Joseph being already in Egypt. Joseph died, and all his brothers, and all that generation" (Ex. 1:5-6). We introduce this family only to inform us that none of its members are still alive.

The introduction then makes an abrupt and unexpected shift: "But the Israelites were fertile and prolific; they multiplied and increased very greatly, so that the land was filled with them" (Ex. 1:7). We suddenly go from 70, a large-ish family, to a nation beyond count that becomes so large it is perceived as a fifth column by Pharaoh. The blessing to be fertile and increase from Genesis 1 only begins to actualize in earnest in Exodus 1. Later, in Deuteronomy 1, the blessing will finally achieve Abrahamic proportions, as we read, "Your God has multiplied you until you are today as numerous as the stars in the sky" (1:10).