



The Torah Code of Honor

*By Rabbi Ariel Bar Tzadok
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Do you know what is the hardest thing about living a religious life? It is living in accordance to the honor code of what religion represents. It is for this reason that many people stumble when it comes to religious observance.

Indeed, even many very religious individuals, even the ultra-orthodox are religious in name only because, like their secular counterparts, they fail to live up to the moral code of honor as prescribed by Torah.

Under these circumstances we have the right to ask just what exactly does it mean to be truly religious and who exactly are the truly religious. The answer to these questions is not defined by the cultural or ethnic expression of one's religiosity, but rather by the manners of one's behavior and the manifestation of one's character. In short and simple terms, not everyone who calls themselves religious and orthodox actually is so just because they dress and look the part.

Being religious must start from the inside and work its way to the externals. The opposite of this is what is usually done and those working in this reverse way cannot honestly be called religious until they get to the point where they can truly embrace the meaning and message of religion within one's heart, life and character. Indeed, there are many today who are not religious who truly are religious, and many who are religious who truly are not religious at all.

The relationship of outer expression and inner conviction must never be underestimated. Torah observance and living by the Torah Code of Honor is not subjective in definition. You and I do not define what is and is not honorable behavior according to Torah. This has already been done by those greater than we.

Shlomo HaMelekh wrote his books Mishlei and Kohelet specifically to teach us about proper character and how to live with honor. His words are meant to speak to the heart, without need of numerous commentaries and philosophical pursuits.

Religious education places overly strong emphasis on academic achievements. While the merits of this are clear, the purpose is often clouded. Our Sages summed up the purpose of learning when they said, "Lo HaMidrash Halkar, Eleh HaMa'aseh," (it is not the learning, but the doing that counts). The "doing" spoken of is an obvious reference to



the observance of the mitzvot of the Torah. For how can one do something without first knowing what to do and how to do it?

Yet, as wise and sound as this simple advice is, many in the religious world never seem to be able to put their learning into practice. For you see, learning Torah is not all about how to keep Shabat and Kashrut. It is not just about the laws of the Shulkhan Arukh and the Gemara, it is about observing all the laws of the Torah, those outlined in the books, and those known from beyond the books.

The laws to which I am referring are those spoken of by Shlomo HaMelekh, only he did not use the term Halakhot (laws) to describe his edicts. He used the Biblical word for discipline, a word that in Hebrew today has lost its original meaning and essence of personal duty, discipline and responsibility. Shlomo HaMelekh defined the essence of living a Torah life as living by the Torah Code of Honor, which he called in Hebrew Musar.

Today the word musar has been relegated the benign definition of moralistic teachings. Musar learning is given the most insignificant emphasis in yeshiva studies today, with only 10-20 minutes a day delegated for the individual students to read on their own from what is referred to as a musar book. No emphasis is placed on its learning, and worse, no emphasis is placed on its practice. The words and wisdom of Shlomo HaMelekh today fall upon deaf ears, which take his words of heart-felt wisdom and turn them into ever-so-briefly discussed academic philosophical discussions, totally void of the component of individual personal responsibility to act in accordance to the highest code of moral standards.

You see, in spite of whatever objections anyone will make, in spite of whatever rationalizations anyone will make, for one to be truly religious must by definition mean that one behaves better than the rest and that one's character is of the highest caliber. Anyone who does not have these attributes, regardless of however ethnically and externally religious such a one appears is in truth not religious at all. For being religious must always first be a matter of heart before it can become a matter of life and thus a matter of public record.

In our many sins, religion and being religious today has more to do with politics and social status than it has to do with the service towards G-d and the observance of ALL His mitzvot, including those dealing with human character. One cannot pick and choose which mitzvot to observe and still call oneself religious. One who observes Shabat and Kashrut whereas at the same time does not observe the mitzvot of proper character, honor, truthfulness, righteousness and faithfulness to G-d and to others is incomplete in regards to one's Torah observance and thus rightfully should not be called religious regardless of one's ethic external or otherwise religious appearance.



In order for one to properly receive all the benefit that a Torah lifestyle has to offer, one must first sincerely and honestly embrace that which the Torah is. Living by Torah by definition must mean a transformation of the inner person more so than any external observance of mitzvot.

The external mitzvot like Shabat and Kashrut are actually easy to observe, especially when one is surrounded by like-minded religiously observant neighbors. However, simply doing what is easy is not and has never been the Torah path. Biblical Musar dictates to us and demands from us that we do that which is hard, this being the inner transformation, the making of changes of character, the likes of which are unfortunately all to uncommon even amongst many of the religious.

Doing the hard things, this is what defines a proper Torah life. And why would someone wish to dedicate themselves to that which is hard and painful all the while that one can walk the easy path? The answer to this is simple, although it is somewhat hard to accept by those who seek out ease and comfort.

Learn and apply a term to Torah and spirituality that is associated usually with physical exercise: no pain-no gain! In others words, as our Sages have said, "L'fum Tza'arah Agrah" (in accordance to the effort extended is the benefit received).

If one wishes to develop strength of character one must make the efforts of cultivating personal courage, self esteem, discipline and the successful fulfillment of one's responsibilities. If one wishes to develop strength of character and thus fulfill the heart of the mitzvot of the Torah one must actually seek out, face and confront life's adversity, trials and hardships in order to learn the discipline how to overcome these challenges. Once one has accomplished this in one's own life, Torah requires of us to serve as role-models to properly guide other souls along the path towards Divine communion.

As with all things, the choice is ultimately ours. We can choose to surrender to Torah and embrace its comprehensive package, transforming our inner selves and reap the benefits of living the most healthy and wholesome of lifestyles in accordance to the Torah Code of Honor. We can also choose the opposite: to be hypocrites and call ourselves religious and reinforce our external observances as a means to convince ourselves that we are really religious and have no need for any inner correction of character.

Of course, in the end, the truth will be made known, for as life proceeds and trials and troubles come, we see that it is only the truly religious, with strength of character as their aid, who rise up to successfully face and overcome life's adversities. All others,



including many of the religious crumble and fall, unable to withstand the most simple of life's challenges.

We must learn to hold ourselves and others to the higher standard as outlined by Shlomo HaMelekh and our holy Sages. The definition of being religious should be exclusive to those who act religiously in accordance to the Torah Code of Honor. All others should be dismissed as misguided, or worse, as hypocrites.

We can transform our religious communities and remove from them all the problems from which they suffer, but the change for good starts with the individual. Look in the mirror, change yourself and only when one is successful with this should one start to address the change in others. When we are truly religious, it will be easy to convince others to be so as well.