

Jeremiah's Words

Commentary to Haftarat Tzav

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Torah is full of commandments and faithful Jews are expected to observe all of them that are possible. We live a religious life and therefore we call ourselves religious. Yet, as religious as we are, very few ever ask the most important question of all religion; what is it really that G-d wants from us? What are we supposed to do to find Divine favor? Bad things do happen to good people all the time, whether or not they are religious. It seems that being religious is no guaranteed spiritual protection against adversity. What then does G-d want from us?

Although we may be Torah observant individuals, we still find ourselves having daily problems. Our Torah does not seem to defend us from these. The reason for this is because the problems we face in life are common to all human beings and even when we observe Torah we still remain human. G-d knows this and has to constantly remind us that even if we observe all the rituals of Torah they alone do not make us better human beings.

In order to remind us of what the Torah is all about, G-d continued to send us prophets. They alone were the true interpreters of the Torah message. Through the messages of numerous prophets, spoken over centuries, G-d spoke to the people advising and warning that unless we address our human problems and become better human beings, then all the Torah ritual observance in the world will not save us from impending disaster.

What does G-d want from us? The answer to this is simple. G-d wants us to become the best human beings that we can possibly be. Ritual Torah observance is a means to an end. All our Sages throughout the centuries point to each individual law and show us the moral lessons to be learned from them. It is not enough that we simply perform mere rituals. The rituals of Torah (Halakhot) are meant to teach us something about ourselves and our world. If we miss the message then we are no better than our ancestors who also missed the message and faced a holocaust of destruction because of their lack of insight.

The prophet Jeremiah stated this concept in no uncertain terms. Here are his words recorded in Jer. 7:21-23. These are the opening words of the Haftara (prophetic reading) for Parshat Tzav.

“Thus says HaShem of armies, the G-d of Israel; add your burnt offerings to your sacrifices and eat meat. For I did not speak to your fathers nor command them in the day that I brought them out of the land of Egypt concerning burnt offerings or sacrifices; but this command I gave them; obey Me and I will be your G-d and you shall be my people, walk in the way I command you that it may be well with you.”

What does G-d want from us? The answer is simple; He wants us to listen to Him. Yet before we can listen to Him we have to first know how to hear what He says. For this most turn to Torah observance and proclaim that as long as they are performing the rituals then that's all that is necessary. Ultimately, this is a true conclusion on their parts. However, Torah observance includes a tremendous amount more than mere empty observance of religious rituals.

For centuries there has been discussion in Torah law codes whether or not the performance of commandments requires that they be performed with full devotion and sincerity. Most acknowledge that they should indeed be performed properly with sincere devotion, implying that devotion (kavanah) is an obligatory part of the commandment's requirements. However, others conclude that one's mere performance, with or without devotion, is all we can hope for from the majority of peoples.

Our Sages were wise. They recognized that if they required that the commandments be performed with devotion and that one did not fulfill one's obligations without it, then almost everyone would not perform the commandments in the first place. In their prophetic wisdom, they perceived the low spiritual state of the majority and ordained Torah law to best accommodate the masses. Granted the few can rise to the highest levels of observance, but alas, the vast majority of laymen cannot.

We are all one nation, uniting both great and small. Obligations that apply to everyone must be able to be fulfilled by everyone. Obligations that only the few can fulfill cannot be made obligatory on the masses who cannot keep up. Therefore, in the end, Torah law allows one to fulfill the ritual observances even without sincere devotion. If not for this allowance, over the centuries, countless numbers would have fallen away from the Torah.

Because the masses are on such a low level they cannot generate the necessary spiritual strength and resolve to change the present status quo of exile. Without the

proper focus of heart one's observance of Torah is lacking an essential ingredient. Without proper focus of heart, one's observance does not have the spiritual power to enable one to connect with Heaven. This is why so many individuals find the Torah path to be tedious, dry and boring. Because their hearts are not into it, their bodies and minds drag them away. Large numbers fall away from the Torah path and many others find it unfulfilling simply because their observance is merely external without any true essence.

Without essence there is no meaning. Without meaning there is no commitment. Without commitment there can be no true observance. Without true observance, there is essentially no observance at all. This is why Mashiah has not come. It is simply due to the fact that the majority of the nation does not keep faith with Torah.

Without Torah there will be no redemption. Our Sages have for centuries warned that if we do not turn to Torah with sincerity with all our hearts, then Heaven would direct human events to make life so miserable for us that in the end we would have no choice but to sincerely call upon Heaven for help. Therefore, in the end we all will embrace Torah, fully and sincerely. The only question remains is whether we will embrace Torah sincerely by choice or by force.

Now that we know how important it is to have a sincere, devotional relationship with Torah and Heaven, what is it that I can teach you next that will bring you to this lofty sublime level of spiritual observance? Alas, now, I have reached the limit of my wisdom. If I had the answer how I could successfully turn the hearts of the masses to sincere devotional observance of Torah, I would have accomplished a task that no other prophet, sage or Rabbi has ever be able to do. I must conclude therefore that there is no magical solution how to find or create sincere devotion in Torah.

Ultimately, no one, no prophet, no Sage, no Rabbi can teach one how to be sincere and devote. This is a decision and a commitment that each must make on an individual basis. The continuation of the Haftara of Parshat Tzav is very threatening. It warns of the Divine wrath facing those who refuse to embrace Torah with sincerity and devotion. It is not a pretty picture. The Sages have also given warnings about modern times and future tribulations to come. They warn us saying that we too had better get right with G-d while we still have the time and the chance. Things will become too late very soon.

If I were you, I would worry. I would not be so flippant to dismiss Divine warnings and so arrogantly say that G-d will take care of everything or that whatever happens is Heaven's will and that if I am destined to suffer and die, then I will. While G-d is in

control of all, including our individual destinies, this does not mean that we lack input and influence. Certainly we can influence a lot.

Yet, do not try to influence Heaven with all your empty offerings. Do not think for a moment that you can gain favor in G-d's eyes all the while that you are not sincere. G-d never looks at just what you are doing. G-d judges why you are doing what you are doing. If your heart is found lacking, then Heaven will create circumstances of stress to force your heart to turn in the proper direction. Tell me this; do you need more stress in your life, more troubles?

We were originally exiled from our land and from our connection to Heaven because we did not listen to the words of the prophets. Maybe, after all these centuries the time has come to pay attention. Start reading your Haftarat (prophetic portions) every week. Read the words of the prophets, without commentaries and without philosophical discourse. Simply read what they said and allow their words to speak to your hearts.

I cannot succeed in changing you, but maybe the Prophets can. They still live through their words. After all, the prophets are speaking G-d's words. If you ever want to hear what G-d has to personally tell you, then read the prophets. Somehow, in some way, the words G-d spoke thousands of years ago to the prophets will jump off the page and speak personally and directly to you, to your hearts. This will happen. All you have to do, is let it.

So as not to distract you from this very important lesson, I have decided to leave out of this essay all the secrets holy Names I discovered in the beginning and end letters of the original Hebrew verses. I will tell you this much, coded within the text is a subtle clue indicating how important the heart truly is and that through it one can have a true communion with Heaven, which can lead to greater influence and control over one's destiny. Let this suffice for now.