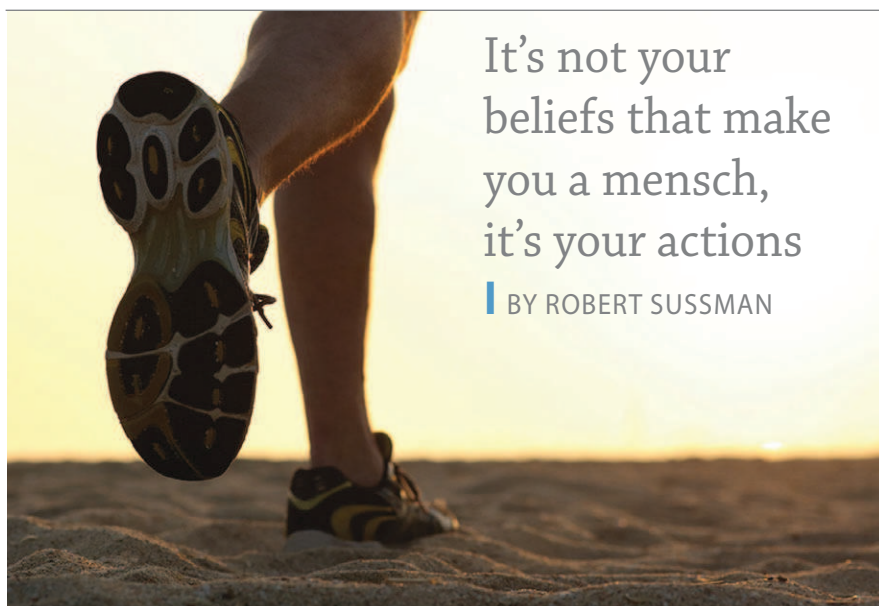


The psychology of Torah: **JUST DO IT!**



It's not your beliefs that make you a mensch, it's your actions

BY ROBERT SUSSMAN

“WE SEE THAT CERTAIN MITZVOS ARE EVEN INTENDED TO REMIND US ABOUT THE DOING OF THE OTHER MITZVOS – MOST FAMOUSLY, THE MITZVAH OF TZITZIS, THE SPECIAL KNOTTED STRINGS THAT WE TIE ONTO OUR FOUR-CORNERED GARMENTS, SUCH AS A TALLIS.”

ROSH CHODESH SIVAN – THE FIRST DAY OF THE Hebrew month of Sivan – marks the anniversary of the day the Jewish people first arrived at the foot of Har Sinai (Mount Sinai) and encamped around the mountain in preparation for receiving the Torah five days later on Shavuot.¹ And the second day of Sivan is the anniversary of Moshe's very first ascent up Har Sinai.² It was on this day that Moshe outlined G-d's vision for the Jewish people. We were to be a mamleches Kohanim (a kingdom of priests) and a goy kadosh (a holy nation).³ And when Moshe asked⁴ us whether we would accept this mission from G-d, we responded in unison: “Everything that Hashem has spoken, we shall do (na'aseh).”⁵ And shortly after this, the people again make this same statement.⁶ And, in case this wasn't sufficient, we're told: “[Moshe] took the book of the covenant and he read it to the people and they said: ‘Everything that Hash-

em has said we will do and we will understand (na'aseh v'nishma).”⁷

And lest we think this emphasis on ‘doing’ was only from the perspective of the Jewish people, G-d Himself admonishes⁸ us “...to guard His commandments and [to] do them (va'asisem).” And we find throughout the Chumash many similar statements by Hashem with this language of ‘doing’ His mitzvot.⁹

And we see that certain mitzvot are even intended to remind us about the doing of the other mitzvot – most famously, the mitzvah of tzitzis, the special knotted strings that we tie onto our four-cornered garments, such as a tallis. As it says: “...that you may see [the tzitzis] and remember all of the mitzvot of Hashem, and do them (va'asisem).”¹⁰ And the next verse again states: “So that you may remember and do (va'asisem) all of My mitzvot.”¹¹

So we can ask: Why all of this emphasis on ‘doing’ – on our actions? After all, most

religions focus their attention primarily, if not entirely, on belief, creating complex doctrines and detailed statements regarding what they do and do not believe about various subjects. In fact, some of the religions that claim they are rooted in the Hebrew Bible abandoned actions altogether – with some actually claiming there is no redemptive value whatsoever in any human actions. In stark contrast, we Jews actually have relatively few beliefs and many of these beliefs would actually be embraced wholeheartedly by other religions. For example: the belief that G-d alone made everything and continues to oversee His creation; or the belief that G-d is all-knowing; or the belief that G-d rewards and punishes.¹²

The lack of emphasis on belief within Judaism is probably most evident by the fact that it wasn't until the 12th Century that the Rambam (Maimonides) formulated his famous *13 Principles of Faith*, and even today it would not be unusual to find someone

“FORGET THE POWER OF POSITIVE THINKING – THE CHINUCH AND THE TALMUD ARE TEACHING US THAT IT’S THE POWER OF POSITIVE ACTIONS THAT REALLY MATTERS.”

who is considered to be a Torah observant Jew, but who is unable to list more than a handful of these fundamental beliefs.

As can be seen clearly from the verses cited above from the Torah, the emphasis in Judaism is on what we do. Good actions are the hallmark of the Jewish people. What person in this day and age hasn’t heard of the concept of being a mensch? The importance of actions in Judaism is further demonstrated by the Hebrew word, halacha – which we usually translate as ‘Jewish law’ – but which is actually derived from the root halach, which means ‘to walk’ or ‘to go’. We are repeatedly commanded by G-d to walk in His ways¹³, but in order to do so, we need to know the way to go – and halacha literally translates as exactly that: “The way to go.” In other words, if a person wants to walk in G-d’s ways, then he must familiarise himself with the way that he must go – he must look to the halacha.

I didn’t grow up as an Orthodox Jew. What makes my story a bit unusual is that no one was m’karev me. In other words, no one was responsible for encouraging me to become Orthodox. At the time that I made the decision to embrace Torah observance, I recognised how desperately I needed a proper Jewish education. A book on the topic of Judaism in its various forms in America eventually led me to the Hebrew Theological Seminary, better known as Skokie Yeshiva. I phoned and made an appointment with the dean. When we eventually met, I explained to him that I wanted to come and study at his school and quite naturally asked what sort of admissions policies they had and what sort of standardised tests I might need to take in order to be accepted as a student. His response: “You can’t just come and study here. You have to live this life – you have to do these things.” And to drive the point home, he started asking me questions about what I liked to eat, noting that I wouldn’t be allowed to have such things anymore. He wasn’t con-

cerned with whether I believed in G-d or even if I believed in the Divine revelation and authorship of the Torah. What was implicit from his questions and what he clearly needed me to recognise very quickly was that the essence of the Torah is in its performance – is in the doing of it. As we’re taught in Pirkei Avos¹⁴: Not midrash (not study), but ma’aseh (action – ie, the doing of the mitzvos) is what’s most important.

The *Sefer HaChinuch*, the anonymously authored Book of Mitzvah Education, teaches¹⁵ something remarkable about the importance of our actions and from which we can derive a lesson on how to make lasting changes in every area of our lives. He says: A person is influenced by his actions and his heart and his thoughts are drawn after the actions that he does – whether those actions be for good or for bad. Accordingly, even someone who is a rasha gamur (a completely wicked person), a person who constantly thinks of doing bad things, if he is inspired for the better and puts time into fulfilling Torah and mitzvos, even if it’s not for the sake of Heaven (ie, his motivations are impure), through the power of these good actions, he will overcome his yeitzer hara (his inclination to do evil), since the heart is drawn after the actions that a person does.

Likewise, he says, even if someone is a completely righteous person, but always involves himself with doing bad things, for example, he practices an evil vocation – he’s a tough guy or a hit man for the mafia – if he is constantly involved the entire day with such activities, after a certain amount of time, he will turn away from the righteousness in his heart and he will become a rasha gamur (a completely wicked person) because, he explains, it is known and true that every man is influenced by his actions.

We find this same idea expressed in the Talmud. The Talmud teaches¹⁶ that a man should always occupy himself with Torah and good deeds, even though he does so with an ulterior motive. Maybe he likes the

honour that he receives for doing such things. Or maybe he gets some sort of financial compensation. Or maybe it makes him feel good about himself. Believe it or not, there are some people who go to shul because they know there will be a bite to eat after the service. It doesn’t matter. Because, our sages teach, as a result of doing these things – in spite of any ulterior motives – a person will eventually, in time, come to do these very same things not because of his initial self-serving reasons, but simply because they’re the right thing to do. In other words, if we do something for the wrong reason, eventually we’ll come to do it for the right reason.

Based on all of this, it is abundantly clear that we are what we do. Our actions profoundly influence and affect us, determining the kind of people that we will become. And this is the key to understanding how we can make meaningful and lasting changes in our lives. Forget the power of positive thinking – the Chinuch and the Talmud are teaching us that it’s the power of positive actions that really matters. We need not worry about the purity of our intentions or our motivations. The key in changing our behaviour is in conditioning ourselves to perform worthwhile actions. Whoever would have thought that the slogan for a pair of running shoes could so succinctly express the psychology of the Torah: Just do it! And we can apply this principle to any situation. The lesson is simple, but profound: If we want to change the way people think, then we simply need to change what they’re doing. ■

“BELIEVE IT OR NOT, THERE ARE SOME PEOPLE WHO GO TO SHUL BECAUSE THEY KNOW THERE WILL BE A BITE TO EAT AFTER THE SERVICE. IT DOESN’T MATTER.”

¹Shemos 19:1-2, and Rashi on 19:1

²Id. 19:3, and Rashi on this verse, d”h u’Moshe alah

³Id. 19:6

⁴See Ramban on Shemos 19:7

⁵Shemos 19:8

⁶See Id. 24:3

⁷Id. 24:7

⁸Vayikra 26:3

⁹See e.g., Devarim 12:1; 27:26; 30:14

¹⁰Bamidbar 15:39

¹¹Id. 15:40

¹²See Rambam Yud Gimmel Ikkurim

¹³See e.g., Vayikra 26:3; Devarim 5:29

¹⁴Pirkei Avos 1:17

¹⁵Mitzvah 16

¹⁶Pesachim 50b