

Deed and Creed, Faith and Works – A Jewish Perspective
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Faiths in Conversation
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We know little about God except that He exists, that He created the world and that because of His deep care for its good He has intervened to set mankind on the proper course. He has summoned the Jewish People to a covenantal relationship with Him in which He places upon us the responsibility of fulfilling His commandments in this physical world. Much of the system of commandments that God has placed upon us is focused on making this world a better place, of bringing blessing to ourselves and to the nations upon the face of the earth. Because of His love and concern for the world, He has called upon us to walk in His footsteps and continue where He left us, in order to bring further good to life upon the earth that He created.

We would not be fulfilling these myriad commandments in the fashion that we do, had we not been commanded by God. They are an expression of our relationship with Him. Everything is founded upon our experience of God the Creator and Commander. That is the bedrock foundation, it is where everything begins. But it is not the goal or the purpose or the endgame. Our purpose is not to strive for faith. The purpose is not to come to belief, the purpose is not to discover God. The purpose is to express the experience of God through deeds, deeds that lead to the improvement of our lives in this world and that make this world a better place for all. It is ultimately the deeds that count and not the faith. Faith is the womb that gives birth to deed.

These commandments, while certainly originating with God and expressive of our relationship with him, also have independent

value for the good they bring to the world. This physical world, God's world, is uplifted one good deed at a time.

If we perform commandments, good deeds, unmindful of the relationship with God, then that is certainly a blemish, but our performance is not meaningless or worthless. If one is lacking the purity of faith, but acts as a Jew should act, that is still at least minimally acceptable. We should never denigrate the accomplishment of good, even without any spiritual or intentional component. The good that God wants done has been done, and that is good. God's will for our world is being accomplished.

And furthermore, life within the system of commandments has in its power to return us to a more mindful relationship with the Creator. In addition to the straightforward purpose of healing the individual and the world, the commandments are also designed to teach and reinforce beliefs and values – so that we will then perform the commandments with further appreciation and dedication! Through the doing, an experience of God may very well develop or be revitalized. We say that if the belief is lacking or is weak, go and do anyway, and the belief will come later. And if it is not lacking and not weak, it will in any case be strengthened and deepened. The great mid 20th century American Jewish theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel said that while Christians talk of a leap of faith, we Jews talk of a leap of action. And the great German Jewish philosophy of the beginning of the 20th century, Franz Rosenzweig, said that if modern assimilated Jews no longer have an a priori sense of God, then it is through the doing that that sense can be re-acquired. The voice of God the commander is heard through the doing.

Let it be clear that there are many things that Jews believe. But they are not a creed or a dogma or a catechism because they are not the centerpiece or the purpose of who we are. They do not define who is a Jew or who is a good Jew. They do not define who

is in and who is out. We are not commanded to believe. Rather, on the basis of the belief, we go and do what we are commanded to do. The deed is done, the world and ourselves are improved, and our spiritual lives gain deeper texture.

The great American Jewish philosopher of the mid 20th century Max Kadushin is famous for his teaching that Judaism does not have a set beliefs that make up a creed, but rather a set of continually renewed experiences that engender within us what he termed value – concepts. We do not have a dogma that commands us to believe that God created the world, rather through the weekly Sabbath observance we re-experience God's creation of the world and the reality of divine creation becomes part of our psyche. We have no dogma that God redeemed us from Egyptian slavery, rather through the yearly re-enactment of the exodus from Egypt during the Passover holiday we indelibly etch within our consciousness its living reality. It is not a matter of faith that God gave us the Torah at Sinai, rather through the daily study of Torah and the yearly re-experiencing of the giving of the Torah at Sinai during the holiday of Shavuot, the truth of the event as a living reality becomes part of our DNA. It is not faith but ongoing experience. It is not centered in the heart or the mind, although it is also there, it is rather centered in the physical body. Or to say this last point differently, the consciousness nurtured is centered in the unitary reality of body and soul together.

We Jews live with a deep sense of obligation to act according to the code of divine law, a deep sense of of commanded-ness. This is the essence of our identity. It is a source of great joy, because we are proud to have been chosen to be commanded. Commanded-ness gives us a sense of adequacy and worth.

Being chosen to be commanded means that God relies on us, trusts us, and believes that we have it within us to live up to His demands. If we were not able to live up to the divine standard, God would not have commanded us. Indeed, it says explicitly in near the end of the Book of Deuteronomy that these commandments are within our grasp to perform, they are not in heaven or beyond the oceans. , “Surely this Torah which I enjoin upon you this day is not too difficult for you, nor is it beyond your reach”. (Deuteronomy chapter 30)

God has real hope for man, real faith in our ability to do good. And so he sets the standard and lets us do what we can do: “See I set before you this day life and prosperity, death and adversity, for I command you this day to love the lord your God, to walk in His way and to keep His commandments ... I have put before you life and death. Blessing and curse – chose life!!” (Deuteronomy chapter 30)

We Jews have no sense like Christians may have, of essential sinfulness, of original sin, that would prevent us from doing what God has commanded. We have no sense of needing to be redeemed from our present existential situation through the grace of God. All we have to do is to do what God has set before us, one deed at a time.

This is crucial because it means that there is no denigration of the corporeal body or the physical world. There is no need to escape them or to be redeemed from them in any sense. The corporeal world does not stand in opposition to the spirit, and it is not an obstacle to be overcome. The physical is not the enemy. The body and the physical world are here to be sanctified through the commandments. This world is an opportunity to serve God and to become a co-creator with God.

So Judaism is a religion very much of the here and now, very much of the physical world. It is this world, the world that we call the world of the mundane, to which Judaism attributes ultimate value. It is here that good is to be done, and it is in this fashion that God is manifest. And therefore, Emanuel Kant, assuming as he did that religion is about the spiritual, went so far as to assert that Judaism is not a religion at all.

In addition to everything I have said, it must be emphasized that when Christians talk of good works and Jews talk about commandments, we are not at all referring to the same thing. Yes we are both talking about physical deeds and as opposed to beliefs, but still the chasm between what Christians mean and what Jews mean is wide.

Jews are suspicious of what Christians call good works, or ethical deeds, or doing what Jesus would do. We are suspicious because it appears to us to be too amorphous, undefined and unregulated, too much based on the subjective conscience of the individual.

We Jews are convinced that human beings need clear laws, rules and regulations, details and particulars of what one must do and what one must not do. There must be code that is absolutely binding and individuals must have a clear sense of obligation to that code.

Judaism is therefore much unabashedly a very detailed legal system. And furthermore, one of the primary Jewish virtues is the development of habitual obedience to the norms and demands of that legal system. We live according to a regulated way of life that determines what is mandatory, what is allowed, what is out of bounds.

We have clear standards of behavior and the vocabulary of our religious lives is one of permitted or forbidden, obligation discharged or not discharged. Although there is much gray and much room for individuality, there is still a solid core of black and white legal regulations.

As we see it, there are very few men who can live consistently upright lives without the aid of a clear and detailed moral code. Christians often respond and say that man is too depraved to live a consistently upright life even with the strictures of a clear code of behavior. Such a code only results in sin and violation. Rather, say Christians, the only hope is to be saved and redeemed through the grace of God that comes through belief in Jesus. And then, the moral code is unnecessary because through God's grace the saved Christian is divinely guided to live the upright life. And Jews respond and say – perhaps for individuals it might work, but for the masses of us: No way; it does not work! You need the nitty-gritty of law, pure and simple! You need the habit of obedience. That is the foundation on which blessing and God are brought into the world.

Primary and secondary texts for further edification:

Yeshayahu Leibowitz, "Commandments", in Contemporary Jewish Religious Philosophy, edited by Arthur Cohen and Paul Mendes-Flohr

"The mitzvot, the commandments, enjoined by the Torah are the ground of the living religious reality known as Judaism... They are the matrix of Judaism as one lives it ... As a religion of mitzvot, Judaism is an institutional religion: its institutions, vis., the mitzvot – not its dogmas and values – define its spiritual content. Accordingly, Judaism is not an abstract of confessional faith, but is rather an emphatically concrete faith grounded in a complex of well-defined religious deeds and ritual practices."

“... It may be said that a Jew is one who attends religious values and faith by virtue of the mitzvot, which not only Judaism’s values but also its categories of religious knowledge and feeling.”

“...Mitzvot are norms for this humdrum existence, the real and constant reality of man: Judaism is not enthusiastic about the ecstatic, unusual moments of one’s spiritual life, the holiday moments of life, so transient and momentary; mitzvot relate essentially to the general and constant, not the exceptional, which is by definition only occasional and ephemeral. Grounded in mitzvot, Judaism renders religion the prose of life, a religion of mundanity. This is the very strength of Judaism. There is no intention here to denigrate the poetry of life, the episodic occasions when an individual rises above his or her daily existence, achieving blissful moments of ecstasy and enthusiasm ... Nonetheless, the basis and continuity of human existence are not those moments of rare poetic elevation, but rather the even keel of prose... A religion that primarily seeks to promote spiritual elevation and even ecstasy is a religion of poetry, a religion that is primarily an ornament to life. The religion of mitzvot is the religion of life itself.”

“... The most characteristic quality of the life of mitzvot is its nonpathetic nature. The life of mitzvot does not rely upon the awakening of religious feelings and does not grant importance to a special spiritual impulse promoting unusual experience and actions. It constantly strives to establish the religious act – even in its more sublime manifestations – as a fixed pattern of fulfilled obligation... And precisely this nonpathetic tendency manifests a tremendous pathos. How vain and empty is the vaunted antithesis between the intense religious experience and the formalism of mitzvot, an antithesis often advanced by opponents of traditional Judaism.”

“Hence, in contrast to Judaism, directed to human experience as it is, there are religions that seek to redeem man from his mundane existence and transpose him spiritually to another order of existence in which utterly different tasks and obligations obtain. Christianity is clearly a religion of the latter type. The Christian who accepts that Jesus Christ died for his sins is said to be redeemed; that is to say, the basis of his spiritual existence is ontologically changed – among other things, he is freed from the mitzvot. Needless to say, Judaism does not recognize such redemption.”

“... “You shall love your neighbor as yourself – I am the Lord” ... The novelty and greatness of this noble principle in the Torah is in its position within the framework of the mitzvot, namely in its inclusion in the long list of mitzvot ... along with such mitzvot as reverence for father and mother; the Sabbath; prohibition of idolatry; rules of sacrificial offerings; the prohibitions against reaping the edges and gleanings of one’s fields (which must be left for the poor to gather); the prohibition of theft, fraud, false oath, and the delay in paying for a worker’s labor; the prohibition of mixed seeds and garments of linen and wool together ... In this context “You shall

love your neighbor” ceases to be merely good advice, a pious wish, a noble striving and sublime ideal, and becomes something real, a law to which a person must relate seriously and solemnly, like the laws of a state ...”

“... Yet some have criticized this religion as being mechanical, for by the very testimony of Hebrew Scripture itself such a religion is the “commandment of men learned by rote” (Isaiah 19:13). After all, the critics argue, even the rabbis realized that “the Merciful One demands the heart” (Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 106b) and that every deed should be determined by the heart’s intention. Therefore, the critics ask, what is the value of a religion whose main theme is a way of life attained by habitual practice till it becomes second nature. However, the “commandment of men learned by rote” is not necessarily a flaw in religious behavior, just as it is not a flaw in obedient citizenship. ... [In most circumstances, most people] act according to habit, upon the basis of practices and conventions to which one is accustomed and which direct one’s conduct quite unawares. Let us not hold such habitual action, “the commandments of men learned by rote”, in contempt, for it – and not the rare personal decision and intention – is the main shield against barbarism... Our generation more than any previous one has with untold pain learned that most people are incapable of living as human beings on the basis of their own autonomous decisions and personal responsibility ...”

Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Rosh haShana, page 28a – 28b

They sent to inform the father of Samuel: “If a man is compelled by force to eat unleavened bread [on Passover], he thereby performs his religious duty.” Compelled by whom? ... — Rav Ashi said: [It means], if the Persians compelled him. Said Rava: This would imply that if one blew the shofar simply to make music, he has performed his religious duty. ...We conclude from this that in Rava's opinion religious precepts do not need to be performed with deliberate intention.

Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Rosh haShana, page 4a

It has been taught: ‘If a man says, I offer this coin for charity in order that my child may live or in order that through it I may merit the future world, behold he is a wholly righteous man.’

Midrash Raba on Lamentations, Prologue II

Rebbi Huna and Rebbi Yermiahu said in the name of Rebbi Hiyya bar Abba: It is written, They have forsaken Me and have not kept My law (Jer. XVI, 11)--i.e. would

that they had forsaken Me but kept My law, since by occupying themselves therewith, the light which it contains would have led them back to the right path.

Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Pesachim, page 50b

Rava pointed out an apparent contradiction [between two verses]. It is written, “For thy mercy is great unto the heavens (Ps. LVII, 11)”; whereas it is also written, “For thy mercy is great above the heavens (Ibid. CVIII, 5)”; How is this [to be explained]? Here it refers to those who perform [God's behest] for its own sake; there it refers to those who perform [it] with an ulterior motive. And [this is] in accordance with Rav Judah. For Rav Yehudah said in Rav's name: A man should always occupy himself with Torah and good deeds, though it is not for their own sake, for out of [doing good] with an ulterior motive there comes [doing good] for its own sake.

Sefer HaChinuch (The Book of [Mitzvah] Education), commandment 17:

Know that a person is influenced according to his actions. His heart and all his thoughts are [drawn] after his deeds in which he is occupied, whether good or bad. Thus, even a person who is thoroughly wicked in his heart, and every imagination of the thoughts of his heart are only evil the entire day--would he arouse his spirit and set his striving and his occupation with constancy in Torah and mitzvot, even if not for the sake of Heaven, he would veer at once toward the good, and with the power of his good deeds he would deaden his evil impulse. For after one's actions is the heart drawn.

Books and Articles for further reference:

Franz Rosenzweig, *The Commandments: Divine or Human*”, in *On Jewish Learning*, edited by Nachum Glatzer, pages 119 – 124 and especially page 122 at the bottom

Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man*, pages 282 - 283

David Brookes, “Empathy”, *New York Times Article*

Rabbi Nathan Cardozo, *Thoughts to Ponder*, “The Ideal and the Idyllic - A View of Halacha as a Musical Sonata”

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, “Sprints and Marathons”, *Parshat Acharei Mot*, April 2014

Rabbi Abraham Isaac haCohen Kook, “ A Sage is Preferable than a Prophet”, in Zaronim, Orot

Former New York Mayor Juliani’s broken window policy