



Jewish Studies Initiative
of North Texas

Deed and Creed, Faith and Works – A Jewish Perspective

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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 Giuliani's broken window policy