

# Worship Leads To Devotion

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## Devotion vs. religious practice

Which one is more essential: devotion or religious practice? This question has been long debated by religion and philosophy. Is it more important to be immersed emotionally in a religious experience or to act upon it in the form of worship? And what is the point of religious worship if there is no faith and devotion behind it?

Recently, there has been a spiritual revival all over the world in very secular communities, and the question of worship and devotion has become all the more relevant. People do not want to be hypocrites, and they feel that refraining from religious worship is justified when they are “not there yet” or their “faith is not that strong”. Faith and devotion seem to be the essence of religion, which makes the above reasoning logical: mind and heart should come first and only then should mouth, hands or feet follow.

## Judaism – “a practical religion”

Jewish religion has a different view on this issue. The first 5 books of the Bible list 613 commandments<sup>1</sup>, which makes Judaism a very practice-oriented religion<sup>2</sup>. Each and every form of worship in Judaism is linked to physical action.

Spiritual experience and the re-telling of Biblical stories and certain episodes in Jewish history are very important, but are not the sole means of commemorating these events: they are always linked with physical action.

On *Pesach* we remember the Exodus from Egypt, and we eat unleavened bread<sup>3</sup> for a week to remind us that our ancestors had to leave Egypt in such a hurry that there was no time for the dough to rise<sup>4</sup>. On Rosh Hashana (the Jewish New Year), when the world is being evaluated and judged by G-d a ram horn (shofar) is blown. The sound of it is similar to the sound of a crying infant, and it symbolizes that our relationship with G-d is like that of Father and child. Each moment of religious Jewish life is filled with action. We wrap tefillin (phylacteries)<sup>5</sup> on our arm and head when we pray. It is not enough to think about words of prayer; the words have to be formed with our lips and pronounced. There are very strict regulations regarding food that could or could not be eaten, etc.

It is interesting to note that some Sages of the Talmud are on the opinion that devotion is not a prerequisite for fulfilling Biblical commandments (*mitzvot*)<sup>6</sup>. According to the laws of Judaism, worship that is performed with regard to every practical detail but without religious intention is

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<sup>1</sup> *Talmud*, Makot 23b

<sup>2</sup> See: *Talmud*, Fathers 1:17: „The essential thing is not study, but deed.”

<sup>3</sup> Deuteronomy 16:3

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.* 6:8.

<sup>6</sup> *Talmud*, Rosh hashana 28b-29b

considered valid.

What is the logic behind this? Why is religious practice so important? What we feel inside matters more, does it not? So what is the point of religious worship without spirituality and devotion?

### **Physical actions can alter our state of mind**

The simple answer is that since we are not heavenly angels, but human beings, we live in a physical world and only physical entities are real to us. Therefore religion, which is spiritual, has to manifest itself in physical actions in order to be accessible to us.

There is another answer on a deeper level<sup>7</sup>: faith, devotion and intention of the heart are intangible and impossible to measure, whereas actions are accessible and real. Physical actions can alter our state of mind, our feelings, our faith. We all know from experience how the clothes we wear, the food and drinks we consume or the activities we are engaged in affect our mood and our physical life. Why would it be any different when it comes to our spiritual life? The constant observance of religious practices makes us more conscious of the divine spark concealed in each of us and it strengthens our faith.

The following can be found in *Sefer HaChinuch* (Book of Education, 13<sup>th</sup> century), in the chapter discussing customs and regulations related to Jewish holidays:

“Do not think, my son, to criticize my words and say: Why did G-d, the Blessed One command us to perform all of these (commandments) that are commemorative of that miracle? Would not the matter be implanted upon our consciousness and not forgotten by our descendants with a single commemorative (commandment)?

A person is influenced by his actions, and his heart and thoughts follow the acts he does whether they are good or bad. Even one who is a completely wicked person, who constantly thinks of doing bad deeds, if he is inspired for the better and puts time into fulfilling Torah and *mitzvot* (biblical commandments), even if it is not for the sake of Heaven, he will turn to the good and he will overcome his Evil Inclination through the power of these actions, since the heart follows the actions a person does. Similarly, even if one is a completely righteous person who desires Torah and *mitzvot* but always involves himself in bad deeds ... after a certain amount of time he will become a wicked person, for we know, and it is true, that every man is affected by his actions.

We learn from our Sages that G-d gave Torah and *Mitzvot* in order to give the people of Israel an opportunity to increase their merit (Talmud, *Makot* 23b), so that we will never cease the words of Torah day or night and that we will merit in the world to come. Those with *tzitzit* on the four corners of their garments, *mezuzah* at the entrance to their houses, and *tefillin* on their hands and their heads will surely not sin. These are constant *mitzvot* with eternal benefits.”

### **There is a well in every human**

It is written in the Bible that Abraham and Isaac made wells in the desert of the Promised Land. According to Jewish commentaries, this action symbolizes the inherent Goodness concealed in every human being that needs to be brought to the surface. Judaism teaches that every man is essentially good

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<sup>7</sup> *Talmud*, Sanhedrin 35a (Rashi)

and when his actions contradict this, it is simply because he has wandered off the path of Good. How can we find this Goodness, the water of Life, under the dry surface of the desert? By acting instead of waiting for faith and devotion to spring forth by itself.

### **Making home for God in the Lower Realms**

Another important aspect of religious deed is that it has the potential to change the world. Out of all the creations on Heaven and Earth, only man was given free will to decide whether or not to accept the reign of the A-mighty. Man's relationship with G-d is the result of a conscious decision. Other creations were not given a choice: they are connected to G-d simply because they are His creations. By creating man, G-d also created the possibility for His unity and His will to be accepted or refused. Human beings were given the choice to recognize the reign of the A-mighty or the rebel against it, and the ability to regard Him as King and not as a tyrant.

It is written by our Sages in *MidrasTanchuma* that G-d created the world “in order to have a dwelling place in the Lower Realms” .

Isaiah describes the A-mighty as “a G-d Who hides Himself”<sup>8</sup> in the physical world. But His desire is that this world be elevated to a spiritual dimension by using the physical elements for a Divine purpose.

What does it mean to make our world a home for G-d?

A basic tenet of our faith is that "the entire world is filled with His presence" and "there is no place void of Him." So it's not that we have to bring G-d into the material world -- He is already there. But G-d can be in the world without being at home in it.

Being "at home" means being in a place that is receptive to your presence, a place devoted to serving your needs and desires. It means being in a place where you are your true, private self, as opposed to the public self you assume in other environments.

The material world, in its natural state, is not an environment hospitable to G-d. If there is one common feature to all things material, it is their intrinsic egocentrism, their placement of the self as the foundation and purpose of existence. With every iota of its mass, the stone proclaims: "I am." In the tree and in the animal, the preservation and propagation of the self is the focus of every instinct and the aim of every achievement. And who more than the human being has elevated ambition to an art and self-advancement to an all-consuming ideal?

The only thing wrong with all this selfishness is that it blurs the truth of what lies behind it: the truth that creation is not an end in itself, but a product of and vehicle for its Creator. And this selfishness is not an incidental or secondary characteristic of our world, but its most basic feature. So to make our world a "home" for G-d we must transform its very nature. We must recast the very foundations of its identity from a self-oriented entity into something that exists for a purpose that is greater than itself.

Every time we take a material object or resource and enlist it in the service of G-d, we are effecting such a transformation. When we take a piece of leather and make a pair of *tefillin* out of it, when we

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<sup>8</sup> 45:15.

take a dollar bill and give it to charity, when we employ our minds to study a chapter of Torah -- we are effecting such a transformation. In its initial state, the piece of leather proclaimed, "I exist"; now it says, "I exist to serve my Creator." A dollar in the pocket says, "Greed is good"; in the charity box it says, "The purpose of life is not to receive, but to give." The human brain says, "Enrich thyself"; the brain studying Torah says, "Know thy G-d."

It is not sufficient for Divine energy to spread out in the Lower Realms: in order for G-d's desire to be fully realized, the existence of the Divine has to be acknowledged and accepted as well. This is the way to make a perfect dwelling place for G-d in the Lower Worlds.

Before the creation of man, the world was not consciously aware of its Creator. It was the creation of man that made it possible for Divine existence to be experienced on a conscious level. Only we, humans have the ability to elevate our physical existence and the material entities around us to a higher sphere, simply by using our free will to choose our actions.

The unity between G-d and the World will be realized in the Era of Redemption, when "the earth shall be full of knowledge of the L-rd as water covers the seabed" (11:9). The revelation of the Divine in the Era of Redemption depends solely on our willingness to perceive and discover the Divine Presence concealed in our world. By making a conscious effort to connect to G-d and to extend this divine connection to every aspect of our existence, we can bring about the Era of Redemption. May it be speedily and in our days!

#### Summary:

People do not want to be hypocrites, and they feel that refraining from religious worship is justified when they are "not there yet" or their "faith is not that strong".

Is it more important to be immersed emotionally in a religious experience or to act upon it in the form of worship? And what is the point of religious worship if there is no faith and devotion behind it?

One of the central teachings of Judaism is that there is a Divine spark concealed in the heart of every human being. In order to elevate it to the level of consciousness, physical action is needed. Religious practice without devotion is not hypocrisy; worship itself brings about and strengthens devotion.

Another important aspect of religious deed is that it has the potential to change the world. Before the creation of man, the world was not consciously aware of its Creator. It was the creation of man that made it possible for Divine existence to be experienced on a conscious level. Only we, humans have the ability to elevate our physical existence and the material entities around us to a higher sphere, simply by using our free will to choose our actions.