

The Weekly 'Hi All' by Rabbi Jeff Bienenfeld

B'chukotai 5776 (?)

One of the central themes of the Mussar movement was - and continues to be - the sharp rebuke excoriating the disconnect between the knowledge of the good and the doing of the good. The fact that people know the ethical right is no guarantee they will act upon it. A person may know - will agree - that it's wrong to lie, to lose one's temper, to indulge in lashon hara, and the like, and yet he will persist in that behavior. All sorts of reasons are marshalled to excuse the delinquency: it's just who I am; I can't help myself; it wasn't my fault, I was provoked; and so forth. That the study of ethics does not necessarily produce people of moral excellence is sadly all too true. In a word, the popular adage, "practice what you preach", is easier said than done.

This disruption between study and deed prompted many of our great commentators to take exception to the following Mishna in Pirkei Avot (4:5): "Of one who learns in order to teach, they enable him to learn and teach ..." Rashi, among others (Rabbeinu Yona and Tashbetz), finds this formulation unacceptable. If someone learns only to teach and not to do, he clearly must be interested in only promoting himself. He craves attention and wants to be respected as a Torah scholar. Adjusting his behavior to

conform with his teachings is unfortunately not part of his personal agenda. Hypocrisy, especially among rabbinic sages, was always looked upon with much reproach and disdain. Rashi therefore amends the text to say that one who studies only in order to teach will not be enabled to study and teach. The reward in being "enabled to learn, teach, guard and perform" is only earned when, as the Mishna continues, "one learns in order to do."

In Parshat B'chukotai, the Torah tells us the conditions under which HaShem will provide the Jewish people with peace and sustenance. "If you will go with My decrees and observe My commandments and perform them ..." (Vayikra 26:3). The commentaries attempt to explain the apparent redundancy of the first two clauses: "if you will go with My decrees", and, "and observe My commandments". Rashi, quoting Torat Kohanim, explains that, "If you will go with My decrees" refers to AMEILUT BATORAH, the physical and mental exertion necessary to master Torah knowledge. The second part, "and observe My commandments", builds on the first to convey the message that, "you should toil in Torah in order to guard and fulfill it..." The meaning is clear: Gd's blessings will only be forthcoming if our toiling in Torah is with the intention of keeping the Torah.

Based upon the above, I would like to suggest how we might better be able to actuate and mobilize our moral intelli-

gence into deeds of virtue and goodness. The answer is AMEILUT, a concept which affirms the truth that not only are hard work and patience necessary prerequisites to acquire knowledge, but the very same strenuous effort and mental resolve must be brought to bear when attempting to change behavior as well. When Rav Yisroel Salanter famously observed that it is far easier to master the entire Talmud than to reverse one bad habit, he may have been exaggerating, but not by much.

And so, if you truly want to be a better person, you'll have to work at it! Know that only dogged persistence and patient stamina will yield a finer you. Strategize with yourself the way you would if you wanted to land a successful deal. Carefully plan what you need to do to control that temper, to act with charity and kindness when you're in no mood to do so. Identify those YEITZER HARAs, those mischievous tendencies that trip you up time and time again. Of course, continue to study our sacred ethical teachings, but after you've put the book down, confront yourself, challenge your present moral baselines and honestly grill your conscience with such questions as: "Whom am I kidding; why can't I be a better spouse and parent? Can't I try a little harder to show some understanding and sympathy instead of flying off the handle? Why am I more interested in promoting myself instead of improving myself? Why do I hide my biases when I ought to be more

objective and honest with my family and friends?"

Indeed, such questions are not easy to ask and even harder to answer, but nothing short of that AMEILUT will reward us with a better self. I'm sure you've heard this clever bit of mussar, but in light of what we've been saying, it deserves repetition. A diligent Torah student once proudly told his Rebbe that he had gone through the entire Shas (another word for the Talmud). The Rebbe retorted, "But has Shas gone through you?!"

May we all merit to learn and do and thus earn the rich reward in knowing that in courageously translating our moral intelligence into deed, we have properly and proudly transformed ourselves into a veritable Kiddush HaShem! 🙌