

Rav Kook Torah



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Avraham Kept Mitzvot

Why are practical mitzvot so central to Judaism? Why is it not enough just to believe in the Torah's central tenets and teachings?

When famine struck, Yitzchak considered leaving the Land of Israel. But God commanded him to remain in Israel. God allayed Yitzchak's fears, promising him:

"I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars of the sky, and grant them all these lands... Because Avraham obeyed My voice; and he kept My charge, My commandments, My decrees, and My laws" (B'reishit 26:4-5)

Avraham kept God's commandments?

Indeed, the Sages interpreted this verse literally. They wrote that the Patriarchs fulfilled the precepts of the Torah, even before their revelation at Sinai centuries later.

Fifth-century scholar Rav Ashi made an even more audacious claim. He asserted that Avraham even observed the mitzva of eiruv tavshilin

– a rabbinically ordained ritual which enables one to prepare food and lights for Shabbat when a holiday falls out on a Friday (Yoma 28b). (Ordinarily, it is forbidden to cook on a holiday if the meal is intended to be served after the holiday is over.)

Observing Eiruv Tavshilin

A certain scholar once commented to Rav Kook that Rav Ashi's statement clearly cannot be taken at face value. How could Avraham know what the rabbinical courts would decree a thousand years in the future? The Sages must have intended to convey a subtler message: Avraham's philosophical mastery of the Torah was so complete, his grasp of the Torah's theoretical underpinnings so comprehensive, that it encompassed even the underlying rationales for future decrees.

Rav Kook, however, was not pleased with this explanation. In his response, Rav Kook emphasized that the Torah's theoretical foundations cannot be safeguarded without practical mitzvot. It is impossible to truly internalize the Torah's philosophical teachings without concrete actions.

This is the fundamental weakness of religions that rely on faith alone. Without an emphasis on deeds, such religions retreat to the realm of the philosophical and the abstract. They abandon the material world, leaving it

unredeemed. The Torah's focus on detailed mitzvot, on the other hand, reflects its extensive involvement with the physical world.

Levels of Holiness

Rav Kook elucidated this Talmudic tradition in a slightly different vein. While Avraham did not literally perform the ritual of eiruv tavshilin as we do today, he was able to apply the essential concept of this ceremony to his day-to-day life. This was not just some abstract theory, but practical knowledge which guided his actions.

What is the essence of eiruv tavshilin? The Sages explained in Beitza 15b that this ceremony helps one fulfill the Biblical injunction to "Remember the Shabbat to keep it holy." Due to the fact that there is a holiday preceding Shabbat, the Shabbat could be forgotten or neglected. In what way might one forget the sanctity of Shabbat?

The holiness of Shabbat is greater than the holiness of the holidays. But when Shabbat immediately follows a holiday, one might mistakenly equate the two and forget that there are different laws governing them. This could lead one to desecrate the Shabbat by performing activities that are permitted on holidays, such as cooking.

Just as we need to distinguish between the holy and the profane, so

too we need to distinguish between different degrees of holiness. This is the underlying purpose of eiruv tavshilin: to remind us of the higher sanctity of Shabbat.

Avraham, who kept the entire Torah, also made this fine distinction – in his life and actions. Avraham differentiated not only between the sacred and the profane, but also bein kodesh l'kodesh, between different levels of holiness.

Sapphire from the Land of Israel.

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