

## A Sanctified Life

In the middle of this week's double portion, *Achrei Mot-Kedoshim*, the Torah lists a Mitzvah that will be restated two more times after this in the Torah; once, in the second portion of this Shabbat and again in Deuteronomy. Jews are enjoined to retain our identity: 'Like the actions of Egypt do not do, and the actions of the Canaan do not do – in their practices do not follow. [Rather] My judgements you shall do and My statutes you shall observe to follow them.'

Maimonides book of Mitzvoth lists this as one of his negative commandments (#30). The warning here is in order to prevent people from following heretical practices. This would extend even to the way we dress. The Midrash extends the meaning of statutes – *Chukkim* – to manners that have been ingrained for generations. The Midrash, elsewhere, extends the prohibition of mimicking the other to cultural practices as well – the theater, going to circuses etc...

On the converse, following God's word means following God's judgements and statutes. The Talmud defines the meaning of judgements as matters that are intuitively known to be correct – the prohibition against idolatry, murder, adultery, theft – if God hadn't written these instructions in the Torah, we would have known that these should have been included.

Statutes, by contrast, are commandments that we would not know as obvious extensions of God's will. In the Talmud's language, these are practices that the Satanic voice inside of us says: 'Eating pork, wearing wool and linen, purifying the leper – those are senseless commandments.' But God instructs us to follow these statutes, even if we don't understand them. (TB Yoma 67b)

These two poles of religious life are fairly representative of the Jewish religious experience. The book of Psalms phrases it thus: 'Avoid evil, and perform good.' That neatly encapsulates the commands of our portion. Avoid the influence of the other; follow the words of God.

However, the concluding section upends this tidy message: 'You shall live in them.' The ironic rabbinic exposition of this idea – living in God's word – is that if a person's life is in danger, we must break Shabbat to help him live. (TB Yoma 85b) Here, living the word of God means, sometimes, breaking the word of God. This sentiment is echoed, centuries later, by the Hasidic movement which could find true devotion to God even in the violation of Torah and would critique rigorous adherence to Torah and Jewish law as self-centeredness.

In his code of law, Maimonides read this verse with slightly different emphasis. If a person favors life at the expense of Torah, the exceptions to this rule notwithstanding, he has not broken the laws of the Torah; he has, rather, upheld a deeper truth of Torah. (Laws of Foundation of Torah, 5:1) Namely, the Torah is synonymous with life. The sanctity of life is our most Godly expression.

Shabbat Shalom Umevorach,  
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