What Are Our Real Preferences? Thoughts for Parashat Ekev

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Ekev
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Economists speak of the “principle of revealed preferences.” This principle teaches that we can better predict what people will do based on their current behavior patterns rather than on what they say they will do. People most accurately reveal their real selves by their deeds, not by what they espouse.

For example, a smoker may say that he/she places infinite value on his/her life. Yet, each time he/she lights up a cigarette, the action reveals that his/her words are not really true. The smoker demonstrates a willingness to endanger health and shorten life—and is likely to continue smoking. A person may claim to believe in this or that cause; and yet, his/her deeds point in a different direction. He/she does nothing to support that cause, exerts no effort or makes no contribution. A person may say he/she wants to keep at a healthy weight and stay fit. But these intentions are less indicative of the person’s future behavior than whether he/she eats healthily and exercises regularly. If we want to predict how people will behave tomorrow, we are better off seeing how they behave today and ignoring what they claim to believe or what they say they will do.

Of course, people can and do change. Patterns of behavior are not fixed permanently. People can actually live up to the beliefs and ideals and goals they espouse—but it’s a safer bet that people will not change. It is generally more accurate to judge people by their actions rather than by their words and their professed intentions. As a rule, we reveal our preferences by what we do, not by what we say.

In this week’s Torah portion, we are enjoined to fear and love the Lord. How may we achieve these lofty goals? We are commanded “to walk in all His ways…to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul; to keep for your benefit the commandments of the Lord and His statutes…” (Devarim 10:12-13).

The Torah understands that our highest spiritual goals are attained through and manifested in our actions. We serve God not by pious pronouncements of faith, but by “walking in all His ways”, by the actual fulfillment of the Torah’s commandments. We demonstrate piety not by artificial displays of “spirituality”, but by solid and steady commitment to righteous living.

It should be emphasized that the Torah views the fulfillment of commandments as a means of coming into a relationship with the Almighty—to fear and to love God. If the commandments are performed in a mechanical and unthinking way, then this reveals one's preference for automatic ritualistic behavior rather than a dynamic living relationship with God.

People sometimes refer to themselves as being “religious” or being “not religious”. We should not pay too much attention to these descriptions. Rather, we should see how people—and especially our own selves—actually conduct life. Over the years, I’ve known individuals who described themselves as being “religious”—but who were very far from leading upright and constructive lives. I’ve also known individuals who have described themselves as being “not religious”—but who have behaved with utmost righteousness and admirable devotion to the needs of the community.

When taking stock of our own lives, it is useful to ponder the “principle of revealed preferences.” We most accurately reveal our beliefs, commitments, and ethical principles by how we act—not by what we say.

What are our real preferences? How can we bring our lives in line with our ideas and ideals?

Angel for Shabbat