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By
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I recently attended a funeral where one of the eulogizers was a grandson of the deceased. He began his talk by saying that he did not prepare any remarks because he wanted his words to be spontaneous. He then rambled on for five minutes, hemming and hawing, and saying nothing of consequence other than that he loved his grandmother and would miss her.

He apparently was so concerned about being “spontaneous” that he did not consider the feelings of the audience who had come to pay their respects to the deceased. He abused our time and our good intentions by not having had the courtesy to prepare some words in advance so that he could speak coherently.

A bit after this episode, I attended a synagogue where a “guest rabbi” delivered the sermon. This rabbi began by informing us that he does not prepare sermons in advance because he believes in speaking spontaneously and from the heart. He went on for fifteen or twenty minutes (which felt a lot longer!) rambling from one thought to another, and leaving the congregation with a feeling that they had learned nothing from him, and that he had wasted all of our time.

But at least he was “spontaneous.”

Often enough, people think that being spontaneous equals being more sincere and more honest. They somehow imagine that speaking without preparing is a virtue rather than an abuse of those who must listen to the unprepared words. They do not realize that one can be sincere and honest even when taking the time to think before talking. Indeed, they do not realize that speaking “spontaneously” without first contemplating and organizing their thoughts is a sign of disrespect to the audience.

When I was in high school, I participated in our school’s debating society. One of the skills we were required to master entailed “impromptu speaking.” We were given a piece of paper with a topic written on it. We were allowed one minute to organize our thoughts, and then we had to give a five minute speech on the topic. We learned the importance of developing a wide store of knowledge so that we could speak intelligently on whatever topic was presented to us. We learned to think quickly and efficiently, to come up with an opening statement, to organize an outline of what we wished to say, and to come up with a concluding statement. Even though “impromptu speaking” appeared to be “spontaneous,” it was

actually based on thinking in a disciplined and structured manner.

A Talmudic teaching has it that one should listen to the words of sages, even when they are engaged in seemingly trivial conversations. Sages have a storehouse of wisdom and knowledge. Sages train themselves to think before speaking, to organize their thoughts. Even when they seem to be speaking casually, their deeply rooted intellectual training leads them to speak clearly and intelligently. Even when they speak “spontaneously,” their minds have processed their thoughts before the words leave their mouths.

The issue of “spontaneity” comes up frequently in discussions of religious observance. We sometimes hear people say that they prefer to be “spontaneous” in their spirituality rather than to follow the rules and regulations of the religion. They don’t seem to realize that spontaneity, unless deeply rooted in knowledge and self-discipline, is not in itself a virtue. Just as rote observance of mitzvoth is religiously defective, so is a shallow spontaneity that lacks forethought. Ideally, a religious personality develops authentic spontaneity—a spiritually alive soul that fulfills mitzvoth with a sense of excitement, wonder, self-discipline, orderliness.

This week’s Torah portion includes many laws relating to religious belief and worship; government; criminal law; domestic life; agricultural laws; holy days. We are told that if we follow the mitzvoth we will have blessing, and if we disregard the mitzvoth we will suffer the consequences.

The underlying message is that a living relationship with God must be based on firm foundations of thought and deed, not on ephemeral “spontaneous” feelings. The more we learn Torah, and the deeper our awareness of the power of mitzvoth, the greater blessing we will find in our lives. Self-discipline is not the antithesis of spontaneity, but the key to genuine spontaneity. Thinking before one speaks and acts is not a sign of artificiality, but is rather an indication that a person follows in the ways of sages.

Organizing and preparing our thoughts before we speak or act is a sign of respect to others. Moreover, it is a sign of self-respect.

Angel for Shabbat