Words and Deeds: Thoughts for Parashat Re'eh

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Has this ever happened to you? People say they love you and respect you…but then act in a manner which is unloving and disrespectful. Have you ever noticed when people say they believe in this cause or that cause…but then proceed to ignore it and refrain from supporting it. They express the best of intentions about this or that…but then act in a way that negates these professed intentions.

In this week's Torah portion, the Almighty states that He will bless the people of Israel because "you will do what is good and right in the eyes of the Lord your God" (Devarim 12:28). The verse specifically refers to action. It does not say that blessings will be given because you think nice thoughts or say nice words. It says that blessings ensue when "you will do what is good and right." A person's quality is measured not by intentions and words, but by deeds.

Later in the book of Devarim (28:9), God promises to raise the people of Israel as a holy nation "if you keep the commandments of the Lord your God and walk in His ways." Rabbi Hayyim Palachi, a sage of 19th century Izmir, pointed out that to "walk in His ways" entails positive action. It is not enough to feel empathy for the poor, or to wait for a needy person to come to you to ask for help; rather, you must "walk" and actively pursue opportunities to help others. The hallmark of a religious person is good and upright action.

A popular saying has it that "the road to hell is paved with good intentions."

Some years ago, Israel launched a massive effort to bring Ethiopian Jews to the Jewish homeland. Our local UJA-Federation sponsored a rescue campaign, indicating that it cost $1200 to bring each Ethiopian Jew to Israel. Our Congregation, along with many others, participated in raising funds for this life-saving effort.

I recall clearly the responses of two members of our Congregation. One of them, a successful Wall Street investor, called me to urge that our Congregation take a leadership role in this campaign. He expressed heartfelt concern for the desperate Ethiopian Jews and thought that this was a major opportunity to mobilize our congregants to action. I was pleased with this enthusiastic response, and I asked him if he and his wife would sponsor a parlor meeting at their home so that we could gather some congregants together to raise funds for this campaign. He said he'd get back to me. He never did get back to me, even though I contacted him several more times to move things forward. When the campaign was concluded, this congregant—so eloquent in his heartfelt concern for Ethiopian Jews—had contributed zero dollars!

Another congregant—young and not prosperous—brought me a check for $1200 to save an Ethiopian Jewish life. I knew that this was more than he could afford. Indeed, he had taken an interest-bearing loan to make this contribution. I told him that he wasn't obligated to go into debt to make a charitable contribution. He replied: if my life were at risk, I would want someone to be willing to spend $1200 to save me! If we don't all rise to the challenge now, lives will be lost. This is no time to worry about going into a bit of debt. This is a time to act.

While one congregant expressed the best of intentions, he did nothing. The other congregant—who had far less ability to contribute—acted on his intentions and continues to be an inspiration to me after all these years.

When the Torah instructs us to do what is good and right in the eyes of the Lord, it is reminding us that words are empty—even hypocritical—if not accompanied by appropriate action. It is telling us not simply to profess friendship and concern—but to act like a friend and to demonstrate concern. It is telling us not to engage in fluffy oratory but to act with integrity and sincerity.

Empty words are not only cheap; they are painful to hear. Good intentions without concomitant action are like dust in the wind.

Angel for Shabbat