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What makes a Jew Different?

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 In loving memory of

Emil W. Herman ז"ל ר' מנחם זאב בן פנחס ז"ל
 who loved and supported Torah learning.

Bechukosai

What makes a Jew Different?

The American Jewish Committee (AJC) once held a symposium on the subject of the future of the Jewish people for the next 100 years.

Invited to speak at the evening were many famous Jews including: International scholar Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, leading Israeli writer A.B. Yehoshua, Ted Koppel from NBC's Nightline, American writer and critic Leon Wieseltier, and others.

At the beginning of the discussion, the writer Yehoshua said that as far as he was concerned, to be Jewish means to live in Israel—that American Jewish life has no meaning.

He went on to say that for him, being Jewish is his "skin and flesh"—unlike American Jews, for whom being Jewish is "like wearing a jacket," something that is removed every day and it not a part of its wearer. He laughed at people who go to synagogue, read the texts of the Chumash and so on, and then go home, leaving their Jewish life behind in the synagogue. To him, being Jewish means that every moment of your life, and every decision you make in your daily life, is connected somehow to other Jews—and that is only possible in Israel.

However, one can ask the honorable Mr. Yehoshua several questions.

One: If to live like a Jew means to live in Israel, then there are many Druze citizens of Israel who serve in the army (some of whom even get killed defending the country), pay taxes, and take part in civic life like all other citizens. Are they too living like Jews?

It pains me to say this, but living in Israel alone is still quite far from living like a Jew. One can live in Israel and be a “Hebrew-speaking gentile.”

But this question of what it means to live like a Jew is not a new question. We were all born Jewish—the only question is how are we to live like Jews? And this question was already asked many years ago.

The Talmud tells us that Dovid HaMelech, King David, wanted to define the meaning of living like a Jew. He didn’t say, like some have wrongly said, that only when the Jew keeps all 613 mitzvos is one living like a Jew—rather, he tried to figure out how many mitzvos are actually required to make one’s life a Jewish life. And the Talmud, at the end of Tractate Makkos (24a), tells us: “Along came David and established it upon 11 mitzvos.” King David said that anyone who does these 11 mitzvos can be said to be living a Jewish life.

And what might those be?

1. “Walk uprightly”: A Jew must be like Avraham Avinu, our Patriarch Abraham, who always listened to G-d and didn’t ask questions
2. “Work righteousness”: This refers to a person who is a true worker, a person who is faithful to his employer. He doesn’t waste a moment. The Talmud gives an example of Abba Chilkiya, the grandson of the famous Sage Choni Hamagel and a tzadik, a holy man, in his own right, who wouldn’t even let himself say hello to fellow Sages who passed him in the field while he was working so that he wouldn’t lose even a second of his employer’s time.

3. "Speaks truth in his heart." Now what does this mean? The Talmud brings an example from Rav Safra, another Sage of the Talmud. Rav Safra was once reciting the Shema prayer when someone came along and wanted to buy something from him. He named a price that Rav Safra agreed to—but Rav Safra could not verbally say to him that he agreed to the price because he was in the middle of reciting the Shema at the moment, and you're not allowed to interrupt in the middle. So the buyer thought that the reason Rav Safra hadn't responded was because he didn't like the price—so he offered a higher price. But when Rav Safra finished saying Shema, he refused to accept the buyer's higher price because as far as he was concerned, he had agreed to the lower price. This is what "speaks truth in his heart" means.

(The Prophets understood that you can't bring about change from one extreme to the other in a person; they understood that you have to start somewhere. So they suggested starting with just a few mitzvos. It's like a person being told by his doctor to change his way of life not by changing everything, which is unrealistic, but by changing two things, like walking 15 minutes a day and drinking one less cup of coffee a day. It's the same thing in Judaism.)

And so, the Talmud tells us, David HaMelech continues with not lying, not hurting anyone else, respecting Torah scholars, not charging interest, and so on, until he had 11 things.

Generations passed until along came Yeshayahu HaNavi, the Prophet Isaiah, who said that to live like a Jew meant only six things: giving charity, being warm to your friend, to not infringe or benefit from your friend's business, to be reserved, and so on.

Further generations passed and along came the Prophet Micah, who defined living Jewishly with three things: acts of justice, acts of loving kindness, and walking humbly with your G-d. Like Isaiah, Micah also talked about interpersonal relationships.

But the Talmud concludes with this: “Along came the Prophet Chavakuk and established them upon one mitzvah, as the verse states, ‘And a righteous man shall live by his faith.’”

Now when we contemplate everything the Prophets demanded of the Jewish Nation over all the years, we discover something that is both amazing and strange: They only talk about the moral mitzvos, the ethical mitzvos, the mitzvos that involve relationships between two human beings—mitzvos like speaking the truth, giving charity, and so on.

But what about putting on tefillin? Keeping Shabbos? Eating kosher? These are not mentioned at all.

This seems to make no sense at all: Is keeping all these rituals not living a Jewish life? Is only giving charity considered living a Jewish life? Is having a Seder on Passover somehow less Jewish than not lying?

But we must understand one thing: When the Jewish Nation lived in the Holy Land, as it did in the times of the Prophets, keeping the ritual mitzvos was self-understood.

In that era, everyone put on tefillin. Everyone ate kosher. Everyone kept Shaabbos. So there was nothing to talk about when it came to those things.

However, there was a moral problem: People were not upright. They didn’t run their businesses ethically. They tricked. They cut corners. They didn’t have pity on the poor. Judges took bribes. And so on.

And so, in the course of the generations in which the Jewish Nation lived in the Holy Land, we find that the Prophets mainly rebuked the Jews on the ethical mitzvos (with the exception of idol worship, which is the basis for moral decline—because when there is no god, then everyone does whatever they want).

And so King David and the Prophet Isaiah and the Prophet Micah all tried to define for the Jews what it means to live like a Jew. So they emphasized all the interpersonal mitzvos, because that was the weakness of the Jews throughout all the time they lived in their land.

But when the Jews went into exile, here the order of things were reversed: It was specifically in exile that the Jews became the most moral people in the world—indeed, the “light unto the nations.” And as we see in reality, ever since then, Jews are the people who feel the pain of the poor and the handicapped more than anyone else.

But when the Jews went into exile, another problem began.

When the Jews were in their land, there was no problem with their observance of the ritual mitzvos. They all put on tefillin, ate kosher and kept Shabbos. But once they were exiled from their land, a weakness in the ritual mitzvos, the mitzvos between Man and G-d, began. As we find in the story of the Megillah, which we read on Purim, the problems began when the Jews participated in the grand feast thrown by King Achashverosh, which was the beginning of assimilation. And that only happens when there is a weakness in the mitzvos that define you as a Jew.

In other words, during exile, the Jews are stronger at fixing the world—in the mitzvos that we have in common with all other nations, like helping the needy, visiting the sick, and so on. But a general weakness in observing the ritual mitzvos has taken hold, especially in the last 200 years and especially after the Holocaust.

And so we come back to the original question in all its strength: What does it mean to live like a Jew?

Along comes the Rebbe and continues the path of the Prophets. Just like they took a handful of mitzvos and isolated them, saying that if you keep them, this is what it means to live like a Jew, so too did the Rebbe come along and isolate several important mitzvos which are the most critical for the survival of the Jewish Nation in our generation.

The Rebbe did make a campaign to observe Shabbos. What he did ask was that men put on tefillin, that women light Shabbos candles, that everyone buy kosher meat, that Jewish homes be filled with Jewish books so as to give your kids some sort of Jewish education, and that everyone try to participate in Torah classes. This is what it means to live like a Jew.

To live in the Holy Land but not to go to shul, not to eat kosher and to laugh at all the ritual mitzvos is not called living like a Jew. And it really doesn't matter at all where you live, where you're from or where you're headed—what has been established for this generation is whether you do mitzvos that emphasize your identity as a Jew, namely, mitzvos that differentiate you from the non-Jew.

And now we come back to this week's Torah portion: "If you follow My statutes and observe My commandments," then all the blessings will come true. Now, note that the Torah doesn't say that the blessings will only come true if you live in the Holy Land—it only says that if we fulfill the mitzvos that differentiate us from the nations, then they will occur.

As the commentator Rashi explains the word "chukim," or statutes, elsewhere, the statutes are "things that are the decree of the king, to which the Evil Inclination responds, 'Why should we keep them?' and the nations of the world speak out against them, like not eating pork, or not wearing Shaatnez [wool and linen]."

To live in Israel and be “Israeli” like the Chinese is Chinese and the British is British is not what it means to live like a Jew. A Jew needs to be different than his or her environment, and the more different he is, the more Jewish he is.

My friends, let us take this lesson of the Parshah to heart, and take it upon ourselves to improve our performance of the ritual mitzvos in whatever small but significant way we can.

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