

# Actions Shape Character<sup>1</sup>

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This sidra<sup>2</sup>, the fifteenth in the order of our Sabbath readings from the Pentateuch, is the first to contain a comprehensive list of religious ordinances, of positive or negative injunctions. The previous subject matter in the Torah has been mainly a narrative character, the moral lessons and occasional precept being woven into the fabric of the story. Indeed, Rashi's first words in his commentary on the Torah are in the form of a question as to why Scripture did not begin with the first precept given to the Children of Israel, a precept which occurs in this sidra (Exodus 12:1). There are no less than twenty precepts in our sidra according to the Rambam's enumeration. The first command is that of sanctifying the New Moon, followed by a detailed list of Passover ordinances which surround that historic festival of redemption with seemingly irksome domestic duties and laborious legal minutiae. What was the Torah's purpose in framing so many precepts? Why is the Jewish way of life distinguished for these numerous commands, negative and positive, that govern its every facet?

The unknown author of *Sefer Ha-hinukh*, a work of listing the six hundred and thirteen Divine precepts in their order of occurrence in the Pentateuch, attempts to supply a reason for each of the commandments. This thirteenth century Jewish philosopher develops his main thesis in explanation of one of the ceremonial details governing the partaking of the Paschal Lamb (precept 16), "neither shall you break a bone thereof" (Exodus 12, 46), thus:

Our first appearance in world history in the role of God's chosen people as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation took place at this season. It is accordingly fitting that we should commemorate this event by performing such acts as would re-enact within us that spiritual achievement, thus perpetuating its impact on us for all time.

Do not think my son to find a flaw in my argument and ask, why did God have to command us to do all this in order to commemorate this miracle. Surely one commemorative act would have been sufficient to ensure that the event would be recalled by us and not be forgotten?...Know that man is influenced by his actions and his intellectual and emotional life is conditioned by things he does, good or bad. Even if he is thoroughly wicked and his mind is dominated by evil thoughts the whole day long, if he bestir himself and endeavour to be constantly occupied with the Torah and its precepts, though not with godly intent, he will inevitably veer towards the good. From the wrong motive he will be led to the right one and by the force of his actions he will kill the evil inclination since it is *actions* that shape character. Conversely, even if a man is completely upright in character and positively conditioned to the Torah and its precepts, if he is constantly engaged in crooked pursuits they will ultimately lead him astray and turn him into a criminal. For it is abundantly clear that every man is influenced by his actions as we have already noted. For this reason our sages stated: "The Holy One blessed be He desired to give Israel the opportunity of gaining merit; He therefore gave them many precepts," since through good actions we are moved to be good and merit the Hereafter. To this alludes their statement: "Whoever has a *mezuzah* on his doorpost and *zizit* on his garment and *tefillin* on his forehead may be assured that he shall not sin." Since the foregoing constitutes precepts of continuous application, their influence is likewise continuous.

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<sup>1</sup> The following article was reprinted, with permission, from Nehama Leibowitz's *New Studies in Shemot*, translated and adapted from the Hebrew by Aryeh Newman (Jerusalem: Eliner Library), pp. 178-182.

<sup>2</sup> I.e. this *parashah*.

Consider well therefore your occupations and pursuits; for you will be influenced by them and not vice versa. Do not be lulled into a false sense of security as if to say: “Seeing that my heart is perfect and unimpaired in its belief in God what harm is there if I occasionally indulge in worldly pleasures, in idling in the streets and marketplaces, engaging in vain and boastful talk with the scorners...Why should it influence me?” Nay my son, beware of them lest you be caught in their net. Many have thus drunk a lethal dose. Will you then be saved? Now that you know this do not be puzzled by the large number of precepts connected with the commemoration of miracles of Egypt. It is a fundamental principle of our Torah that the more we become preoccupied with them, the more we are influenced in the way we have described.

In other words, religious training should not proceed from mind to deed, from reason to action. The educator need not appeal to the understanding of his charge through oral persuasion in the hope that convincing will ultimately lead to the appropriate actions. Rather as Rambam observes in his introduction to *Avot*:

A man should cultivate good deeds in order to improve his character and eschew evil deeds for undesirable traits to disappear. Know that good and bad qualities can only be cultivated by repetitive acts. If those actions are good we acquire a praiseworthy trait, if bad an undesirable one.

Should we doubt the efficacy of this mode of education, let us but for a moment recall those concentration camp officials who had to carry out the orders of their masters and remember how ordinary folk who were neither angels nor devils became brutalized as a result of the brutal preoccupations to which they had been appointed. Though they might have at the beginning experienced revulsion, habit and custom soon got the better of them and the words of the author of *Sefer Ha-ḥinukh* were borne out, that actions shape character. But the converse is also true. If we recognize that the preoccupation with evil pursuits can brutalize human character why should we not believe that good deeds and performance of Divine precepts can exert a benevolent influence over man? One objection may be raised to this mode of character training emphasizing the importance of habit and performance: the demoralizing effect of perfunctory religious practice where the spirit is sacrificed to the letter. This is alluded to by the prophet Isaiah in his denunciation of his contemporaries:

וַתִּהְיֶינָה יְרֵאָתָם אֵתִי, מִצִּוֹת אַנְשִׁים מְלֻמָּדָה :

Their fear of Me is but a precept of men, learnt by rote. (Isa. 29:13)

Isaiah’s complaint would seem to apply though to a generation saturated in Jewish tradition and practice. There the danger existed of religious ceremonies degenerating into mere lip service as indeed the prophet indicates had happened. But where the bond of tradition and the legacy of generations were in danger of disappearance, a return to Jewish practice and precept constituted the elementary first step in remedying the situation. Unlike Isaiah, the prophet Jeremiah finds in his generation that even elementary Jewish practice is lacking:

זֶה הַגּוֹי אֲשֶׁר לֹא-שָׁמְעוּ בְּקוֹל יְקֹוֹק אֱלֹהָיו, וְלֹא לָקְחוּ מוֹסֵר; אֲבָדָה הָאֱמוּנָה, וְנִכְרְתָה מִפִּיהֶם :

This is the nation that has not listened to the voice of the Lord its God, nor accepted correction; faith is perished and is cut from their mouth. (Jeremiah 7:28)

Malbim interprets each phrase in the above citation to refer to a specific flaw in Israel’s conduct. The first line, “that has not listened to the voice of the Lord,” refers to their lack of religious conviction; the second line, “nor accepted correction,” to the punishment they had

suffered but the lesson of which they had not taken to heart; “faith is perished” – from their heart; “and is cut off from their mouth” – that they have not even the practice of ancestral custom to their credit. Such a generation requires training in practical Jewish precept, in observance of at least of the letter even before the spirit, in accordance with the findings of the *Sefer Ha-hinukh* that actions shape character and performance out of wrong motives eventually lead to the right ones. This order is ancient indeed and was followed by our ancestors on Mount Sinai when they said: “We shall do and hearken,” putting performance first and conviction afterwards.

Accordingly it would have been quite inadequate for the Torah to have perpetuated the message of the Exodus from Egypt by calling on us merely to recount the story. The profound implications of this event through which the Almighty acquired us as His people (warranting its being referred to in the opening words of the Ten Commandments) were engraved on the historic memory of the Jewish people through countless symbols and precepts applying to every facet of our existence. They involve positive *performance* for every age-group, every station of life, at all times and places, at home and abroad. Their spiritual impact was meant to be irresistible since *actions shape character*.