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TYING SHOELACES: BLENDING THEORY AND PRACTICE

by Rabbi Harold Schulweis

Reb Leib Saras said, "I do not go to Rabbi Dov Baer of Mezritz to learn the interpretations of the Torah. I go to him to observe his way of tying his shoelaces." Why? Because with the demonstration of his fingers a person teaches meaning.

Dig your hands in your pockets or put them behind your back. Then instruct someone orally how to tie their shoelaces without the benefit of moving your hands. It is an exhausting exercise bound to leave you tongue-tied and exasperated. It is far less frustrating to take your hands out of your pockets, bend down and show the student hands-on the motions of thumbs and fingers to accomplish the tying of the knot. The philosopher Bertrand Russell called these two ways of learning "knowledge by description" and "knowledge by acquaintance."

What might this tell us about transmitting Judaism? Much of Jewish education falls into the category of "knowledge by description." From the pulpit, the adult education platform and the teacher's desk Judaism is talked about. Those who listen learn about the seder, about prayers, about the lulav and etrog, about the Sabbath and kashrut. It is an important way of knowing.

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At its best it communicates the history and rationale behind Jewish acts. It informs the listener as to the meaning of the prayer and the purpose of the observance. Such teaching is a response to the pedagogic behaviorism that puts on the tefillin, shakes the lulav, sounds the prayers but knows neither why nor what for.

Many parents prefer knowledge by description because practice is not the major motivation for giving their children a Jewish education. As they express it, they want their children to know. And the knowledge they have in mind is theoretical. They want them to know the history of our people and its practices. They abhor ignorance. Ignorance is not knowing what the phylacteries are or how to don them. It has nothing to do with whether or not the tefillin are put on daily. They are more interested in the phylacteries of the head than in the phylacteries of the hand.

But doing is not knowing, and knowing is not doing. Behaviorist educators adopt the "na'aseh v'nishmah" pedagogy that contends we learn by first doing and thereafter offering rationale.

They maintain that people believe what they do more than they do what they believe. Performance overcomes the fissure between theory and practice.

There are strengths and limitations in knowledge by acquaintance methods. However commendable, behavioral pedagogy often produces routinized and mechanized action devoid of the poetry, philosophy and ethics of the ritual act. Not a few students of such behaviorist instruction complain that they were taught "how" without knowing "what for." They boast fluency in reading but confess that there is little comprehension or spiritual feeling that

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attends the recitation. They are proud of their skills in performance but embarrassed by their failure to understand, believe or feel. They have been told that understanding and spirituality will come "later." Philosophy and poetry are postponed till tomorrow. But tomorrow never seems to come.

Midrash without ma'aseh or ma'aseh without midrash are half wisdoms. And here the shoelace parable breaks down. A shoelace is a functional string, but a pair of tefillin is a religious symbol. Tying a shoelace is a mundane function calling for literal instruction. Whether it is a single or a double knot is of little consequence. But tefillin tied seven times around the weaker arm, in a particular order and with specific prayers, require a different attention. To drop a pair of phylacteries is not to drop a pair of shoelaces. Holiness requires intention, thought, reverence.

Simply to put on the tefillin routinely is to rob it of its intellectual, moral and spiritual meaning. We have seen proselytizing pietists donning the phylacteries upon the limp arms of half-willing people who pass by and repeat the mumbling of prayers. The teacher is convinced that the act itself performs the mitzvah. "Later," he may reason, rationale may come. Inadvertently, an act of immense potential meaning is trivialized.

The Jewish educator must not separate doing from thinking or acting from feeling. That division inadvertently creates a gnawing schism of Jews who practice mindlessly and Jews for whom Judaism is a speculative game. It destroys the holism that unites head, heart and hand in the unifying gestures.

When the rabbis were puzzled by the two biblical versions of the same Decalogue, one "Remember the Sabbath," they resolved the apparent

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contradiction of the unity by declaring, "Shamor v'zachor b'dibbur echad"--"observe" and "remember" were spoken at once with one Divine word. It is a difficult but important Jewish pedagogic task to transmit at the same time "what" and "what for," "how" and "why," knowledge by description and knowledge by acquaintance.

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