

Parshat Shemini: Keeping Kosher: Should I follow a tradition when there is no rational explanation for it – April 6, 2013

When I teach Judaism for non-Jewish students, I am often asked why our people keep such a particular diet: Why can't we eat pork, why just some type of poultry, why not seafood, etc., as the it appears in our Parshah. And when I tell them that the Torah does not give any rational explanation for these laws, and that we classify them among a category of commandments which have no logical reasoning whatsoever (called "chukim" by our sages), the students are always very surprised. They can't conceive the possibility of a person behaving in a certain way, without knowing the meaning or explanation for the practice. Moreover, they are unable to understand how it is that an entire people have preserved these customs for thousands of years.

When the question arises, I usually answer the following: "You see me using a tie, right? Now, try to explain to me why I use it." I am generally told that it is a specific social practice, which is identified with elegance or formality. Then I continue asking: "And what is the rational logic that identifies the tie with elegance?" Finally, we all agree that there are customs we fulfill simply because they are the norm accepted in the societies where we live, despite the fact that we don't understand their explanation. The same way, we could conclude, for the Jew who is born within a family that keeps the commandments, the laws of kashrut do not need to be justified; to them, they are as natural as combing their hair in the mornings or putting on a tie for a wedding. However, for those who didn't grow within a society that used to follow those customs, the questions "Why is it important?" or "Why do I have to do it?" become unavoidable.

As Jewish parents, we struggle to invest in our children's education, and try to make sure that they continue on the path of tradition. And in order to

fulfill this purpose we send them to educational activities at the synagogue and also to Jewish camps; we try to explain to them the history of Judaism and the content of the Jewish holidays. But what happens, often enough? We start feeling that this is not enough. Even though many times we see the excitement in our children, we then feel frustrated because we cannot foster that motivation transforming it into a Jewish way of life. It gets easier for us to educate our children about what Judaism is about, but much more difficult is to educate them for a life of Jewish practice: Coming to services, doing Tzedakah, saying the Shema in the evenings, having a Shabbat dinner, etc.

I believe that one of the ways to start rectifying this problem is trying, in our educational efforts, to give importance not only to the "content" of being a Jew or to the rational explanations of our traditions. This is important, for sure, but our goal is not only to raise children that can be "learned" in Judaism"; our most important mission is to raise committed Jews, who could continue with our millenary tradition. And I think in order to achieve this, what our children need is not for us to offer them a compendium of logical explanations as to the reason why it is important to preserve tradition, but rather propitiate, in the framework of our homes and through our example, the appropriate space so that tradition emerges as something natural and obvious, perhaps as obvious as the use of a tie in a formal environment.

To put it simply: It is not only important to give our children explanations of why a Jew does what he does. It is also important, or even more important, to do these things with them! If they see us celebrating Shabbat and they do it with us, they will possibly keep on doing it in the future. If they see us doing Tzedakah regularly, they will grow up feeling love and affection for that tradition, and surely never move away from it. The author of the *Sefer ha-Chinuch*, a famous anonymous compendium of the 613

commandments, published in Spain in the 13th century, wrote in its preface: Hacharei ha'maasim nimshachim ha'lebabot – "after the actions is the heart drawn".

May God help us incorporate into our lives actions that will bring our children to the love for God, for the Torah and the People of Israel.

Shabbat Shalom!