

Parshat Bo

Contributed by Rabbi Avi Weiss
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The Interdependence of Actions

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By Rabbi Avi Weiss

In this week's portion, the Torah begins to present commandments given to the Jewish people. One wonders why so many commandments are proscribed in such detail.

The Sefer Ha-Hinukh (13th century) offers a comment that reveals a basic message about the purpose of commandments. He writes, "Know that human beings are influenced by their actions and their intellectual and emotional life is conditioned by the things they do, good or bad." In other words, what we do very much influences what we feel.

Hundreds of years later, Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler offers an understanding of love that reflects the Sefer Ha-Hinukh's sentiments. While all people walk a tightrope of balance between giving of themselves to others, and taking from others, by and large, Rabbi Dessler argues, each person can be categorized as either a "giver" or a "taker." Rabbi Dessler insists that the cornerstone of love is the capacity to give to the loved one. And he adds, it's not necessarily the case that one first loves and from the loving comes the giving. The reverse is equally true, and even more powerful. One gives, and from the giving comes loving. The more one gives, the more one loves. In fact, the real test of love is not only what I feel towards you, but what I am prepared to do for you.

What is true in personal relationships involving love of others is also true about ritual commandments, religious observance, which connects us and expresses our love to God. Perform the ritual and, from the act, this feeling may come. Hence, Jews at Sinai first proclaimed, "we will do." Only then did they say, "we will listen."

A story illustrates this idea. My mother of blessed memory and father, may he be well, made aliyah in the late 70's. Whenever my parents flew to New York, it was my responsibility to meet them at the airport. One time, my father called me to inform me that at the last moment their arrival was moved up by 24 hours. Professing my deep love for my parents, I insisted that I couldn't change my schedule on such short notice. "You became a hot shot Rabbi," my father responded, "and don't have time for your parents?" "I love you deeply," I protested, "but it's difficult to alter plans at the last moment." I'll never forget my father's response. "Don't love me so much, just pick me up at the airport!"

Not coincidentally, the root of ahavah, love, is the two letter Aramaic word hav, to give. It reflects the point made by the Sefer Ha-Hinukh that "actions shape character." It is nothing more than what my Abba said: "don't love me so much, just pick me up at the airport."