



Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies

OF AMERICAN JEWISH UNIVERSITY

Today's Torah

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Shabbat Parashat Va'et-hannan Shabbat Nahamu

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Multiple Motives for Our Actions

Torah Reading: Deuteronomy 3:23-7:11

Haftarah Reading: Isaiah 40:1-26

Why do I show up to teach my classes at American Jewish University? For a whole variety of reasons. I love teaching. I signed a contract to do so (I promised). I owe it to the students, who paid tuition. I am being paid. Responses from students challenge me to think in new ways, thus enriching and expanding my scholarship and writing. I am deeply committed to Judaism for reasons that I have thought about a lot, and I am glad to be training the next generation of rabbis and lay leaders for the Jewish community. I want people to think well of me, that I am responsible, etc., etc. At any one moment, any of those motives might be foremost in my mind – although mostly my love of teaching is the motive that I am most conscious of – but if I think about it, it is always a combination of motives that get me to the classroom on time and well prepared.

That same multiplicity of overlapping motives spurs Jews to observe Jewish law. For some it is because God commanded it; for others it is their family and communal tradition and thus part of their identity; for others it is what they must do to associate with other Jews who keep kosher and observe Shabbat and the seasonal holidays, so they do too; for others it is because they think that Jewish law spells out what it means to be moral in a way that is more astute and detailed than general moral principles, and they strive to be moral and to be seen as such; for others it is because Jewish observance creates a structure that

frees them from work one day in seven and on the seasonal holidays as well and thus serves to set aside time to bring their family together; for others it is the aesthetics of Jewish art and music that embellish Jewish life and thus attract them to be part of it; etc., etc.

Even though Jews thus engage in Jewish practice for a variety of reasons, Jews generally think that the Torah insists that we observe the commandments exclusively because God told us to do so and that God will punish us if we disobey and reward us if we obey. The Bible, though, includes at least eight different rationales for abiding by the commandments and the Rabbis added four more, as I describe in Chapter Four of my book, *For the Love of God and People: A Philosophy of Jewish Law*. Only one of these twelve is that we should obey the commandments because God will enforce them.

Another one of the eight in the Bible occurs quintessentially in our Torah reading this week, where the Torah speaks of the inherent wisdom of the Commandments. The Torah suggests that we should obey God's commandments because it would be foolish not to do so. Even non-Jews, who have no reason to appreciate them and who, in fact, would probably want to deny their goodness, cannot help but recognize the sheer wisdom of living life by God's commands. Thus Moses says this to the Israelites (Deuteronomy 4:5-8):

See, I have imparted to you laws and norms, as the Lord my God has commanded me, for you to abide by in the land that you are about to invade and occupy. Observe them faithfully, for that will be proof of your wisdom and discernment to other peoples, who, on hearing of all these laws, will say, "Surely, that is a great nation of wise and discerning people." For what great nation is there that has a god so close at hand as is the Lord our God whenever we call upon Him? Or what great nation has laws and norms as perfect as all this Teaching that I set before you this day?

What does it mean to call the laws wise? Wisdom, in the Bible, means the knowledge gained from experience, in contrast to what we know through book learning or intellectual analysis. Bezalel, chief architect of the tabernacle, is termed "wise" for his proven skills of design and engineering. In a broader sense, the wise person is one who knows how to live life intelligently. She or he has *savoir faire*, "street smarts," and can guide you to avoid the pitfalls of life and to make the most of it. To call the Torah's laws wise, then, means that they come out of long experience with life and that they therefore fit human needs and goals well, that they are tried and true.

Indeed, the Bible assumes that because of the wisdom of the Torah's laws, one who abides by them will be happy. It is, after all, the same God who created the world who also gave us the commandments, and so the Torah's laws fit the structure of nature. Therefore, if we obey the commandments that God gave us, we will succeed in achieving the kind of life we want, and this, in turn, will make us happy. We affirm this each time we replace the Torah in the ark and recite the last two of these verses from the Book of Proverbs (3:13-18):

Happy is the person who finds wisdom,
The person who attains understanding.
Its value in trade is better than silver,
Its yield, greater than gold.
It is more precious than rubies;
All of your goods cannot equal it.
In its right hand is length of days,
In its left, riches and honor.
Its ways are pleasant ways,
And all its paths, peaceful.

It is a tree of life to those who grasp it,
And whoever holds on to it is happy.

This motivation to abide by the Torah's laws is not often discussed. Some may even see it as being unsuitable and unworthy: we should obey God's commands out of fear of what God will do to us if we disobey or, even better, out of loftier motives like our love for God, our aspiration to be moral, or our mission to be a light unto the nations.

All of these motives, of course, not only appear in the Bible, but are repeated often. In fact, the theological thunder and lightning of Sinai is recalled in Chapter Five of Deuteronomy (5:19-24), the chapter right after the verses from Chapter Four on which we are focusing. Then, in Chapter Six, which is also part of this week's Torah reading, we learn that you should "love God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might" (Deuteronomy 6:5).

The juxtaposition of the fire and brimstone of the scene in which the Decalogue is given and the love that should motivate us to obey God's commandments with the safe and sound motivation of wisdom in Chapter Four indicates that the Torah was aware that human motivations are complex. We do things for many, overlapping reasons, some self-serving or at least self-regarding, and some altruistic and maybe even sacrificial. In many cases, we are not even aware of all the factors that prompt us to act in a given way. The Torah reading this week indicates that God appreciates commitment to the commandments for motives as self-serving as their inherent wisdom and as high-minded as the love of God.

As illustrated by my multiple reasons to show up to class on time and prepared, our relationships with other human beings are no different. Sometimes we do things for others because of our own selfish interests: either we want to gain something for ourselves or protect ourselves from some negative outcome. At other times, we reach out to and for others, perhaps even at considerable cost to ourselves.

If the Torah's description of our relationship to God should be our guide, we need not be embarrassed about the self-serving motives that sometimes impel us to observe Jewish law or do things for others, as long as we do the right thing and try to cultivate more other-regarding motives as well. We can do good things because they are wise even if we might also do them because they are good and holy.

For more on this topic, see Elliot N. Dorff, *For the Love of God and People: A Philosophy of Jewish Law* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2007), Chapter Four.

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