

Singer-Jordan Edition
Aikey

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The question was, why are the “small” *mitzvos* that people tend to “walk all over” the ones that prove a person’s commitment? The answer is embedded in this story in the *Gemora*.

“When Yosi *ben* Kisma became sick, Rebi Chanina *ben* Teradyon visited him. The former said to him, ‘Chanina, my brother, are you unaware that this nation (Rome) is reigning by Heavenly decree? It has destroyed the Temple, burned its courtyard, killed the pious wiping out the best of the Jewish people, and still remains in power. Yet I have heard that you occupy yourself with Torah in public, carrying with you Holy Scrolls the entire time!’ Rebi Chanina answered, ‘Heaven will have mercy on me!’ Rav Yosi asked him, ‘I give you reasons [to stop what you are doing] and you answer me that Heaven will have mercy on you? Will the government not burn you with the Torah?’ So Rebi Chanina asked him, ‘What will become of me in the World to Come?’ He asked him, ‘Did you not perform [meritorious] actions?’ [Reb Teradyon said,] ‘Once I mistakenly used [my money] money for the poor that I had set aside for *Purim*, but did not reimburse myself from *tzedakah*.’ ‘If so,’ Rav Yosi answered him, ‘I wish my share could be like yours!’” (*Avodah Zarah* 18a)

That was Rebi Chanina’s answer back to his *rebi*, that he could have reimbursed himself from *tzedakah* money, but didn’t?! As noble an act as that was, didn’t his willingness to teach Torah at the risk of death count for so much more?

Yes, but Rebi Chanina understood that his *rebi* already knew that. If he was asking the question, he must have meant something else like: “Of course learning Torah in public in the face of grave danger is a *mitzvah* and makes a profound statement of Jewish commitment to God’s ways. However, what I want to know is whether you are the right person to make that statement, because it is at great risk to your life and those of others! So, here’s the question to you: Are you a zealot by nature, or one created by the current crisis?”

There was only one way to prove that he was the former, and that was to show how he conducted himself when performing *mitzvos* that did not involve any risk, and no one else knew about. What he did by forgoing his money for *tzedakah* had been

totally unnecessary, and totally between himself and God. Clearly his student was a zealot through and through, which made his self-sacrifice for Torah even more sincere and merit-worthy. Rebi Yosi confirmed this by saying, “I wish my share could be like yours!”

My father, *a”b*, was an interior designer, and on one site inspection of house we had designed, he took me around a corner in the front vestibule area where the coat closet was built into the wall. He pointed out how the moulding on the wall turned the corner as well, right up until the closet door, and how the carpenter had gone the extra mile to finish it off professionally.

“This is why I hire this person,” my father told me. “Almost no one will ever see his handiwork here since it is out of eyeshot of most. Yet, he finished off the moulding as he would have had this spot been in full view of everyone. This is someone who cares more about the quality of his work than the money he gets for it, a rare thing today.”

That lesson is forty years old, but it has stuck with me all this time like it was yesterday. Though it may not be apparent to others, it has influenced just about everything I have done, especially with respect to my *Avodas Hashem*—Service of God. That, and my father’s other teaching that, “Anything worth doing is worth doing well.” It doesn’t just make for great results, it also makes for greater people.

Everybody has a bottom-line, and I don’t just mean financially. I mean morally. It defines us as people, determining if we have chosen a path of personal excellence or mediocrity. Yes, perhaps compared to the people with whom you surround yourself you are doing well. But in today’s world, that doesn’t say a whole lot. The real question we have to grapple with is, “How do I compare to *me*?”

Of course, you can’t really answer that question if you don’t know who “me” really is. You can think you do after years of living with yourself, and you may recognize yourself when you look in the mirror. But if you have never really tried to sustain a high level of spiritual zealotness, how can you ever know what you are capable of achieving?

But here’s the thing. We may not know what our full potential is, or even half of it. But Heaven does, and they’re going to share that secret with us on our personal day of judgment. They’re going to show us what we *did* accomplish compared to what we *could* have accomplished, and the results for so many will be shocking.

If you can still do *mitzvos*, there is still time to get on track. It just means taking stock of all the *mitzvos* that you “trample” by minimizing how much of yourself you put into them. Change that, and you change everything, especially the level of Heavenly help you will receive to accomplish what to others might seem impossible.

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