

Walk through the Parsha by Rabbi David Walk

The Observant

Who is the most observant person who ever lived? Maybe Rabbi Akiva. How about Rashi or the Rambam? Who do you think? Well, I would have said Sherlock Holmes. Nothing escapes his scrutiny; his powers of observation are legend. See the problem? What do we mean by observant? There's actually another problem, Holmes never really lived. However, he was a constant companion of my youth, both in books and on screen (Basil Rathbone, Jeremy Brett, Benedict Cumberbatch, I loved 'em all, except Robert Downey Jr.). The essential term I'm trying to understand is SHAMUR, which we usually translate as 'guard', but in many contexts we render it 'observe'. And the best place to investigate our issue is the beginning of this week's Torah reading.

Before I get down to business, I must editorialize. I don't like the epithets DATI and CHILONI, normally translated as 'religious' and 'secular'. Using those expressions to describe an individual requires a peak into their soul. I prefer to say SHOMER MITZVOT or not, which generally is an evaluation of visible behavior. Even that is chutzpa, because who am I to categorize another, but sometimes it's just convenient to have these labels, like when getting recommendations for a roommate or a shiduch. Please, use them sparingly and cautiously. And this begins our

discussion what do we mean when we say someone observes (SHOMER) mitzvot? One might assume it means to do or perform these Divine acts. But that leads us to the problem which appears in our parsha.

Our reading begins: If only (EIKEV, also difficult to translate) you will listen to these laws, safeguard (observe?) them and perform them, then the Lord your God will safeguard for you the covenant and the kindness which were sworn to your ancestors (D'varim 7:12). So much to parse in that pasuk! But my difficulty is that the verse separates observance (USHMARTEM) from performance (VA'ASITEM). What's the difference?

This phrase appeared last week in the famous verse: Therefore, keep (USHMARTEM) and do (ASITEM) them, for this is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the nations which shall hear all these statutes, and say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people' (4:6). Over there, Rashi explains that the SHMIRA is MISHNEH or Torah study. I have two problems with that explanation. Firstly, the root SHAMAR is related to guarding, and in our verse the continuation of the thought is that God will SHAMUR our covenant and relationship. That thought doesn't lend itself to study. And let's be honest, when we get up in the middle of the night to do SHMIRA, we're guarding against bad guys, not studying Torah. In my old IDF days, if I got caught learning during my SHMIRA, I could have gone to jail. Baruch Hashem, I was

never caught.

Here's my second problem: We have a beautiful statement in the blessing recited immediately before we chant Sh'ma every morning: Place in our hearts the urge to understand, to intuit, to listen, to learn, to teach, to safeguard (LISHMOR), to perform and to fulfill all the concepts of the study of Your Torah, in love. Marvelous! Sadly, I don't think many daily daveners give that declaration its proper due, because we're rushing or busy readying our tzitzit for Sh'ma. In this list, clearly study and SHMIRA must be different concepts. Problem number 2 for Rashi's approach.

I think that we can get the beginning of a solution to our conundrum in a verse from Psalm 119, the longest chapter in the Tanach. Intellectual endeavor is a major theme running through this long poem, and verse 34 gives us a new way of seeing our problematic term: Give me understanding that I may treasure (ESHMIRENA) Your Torah and guard it with a full heart. The SHMIRA is cognitive. We can only properly guard something if we have the knowledge to appreciate its true worth. One will be pretty lackadaisical in their protection of an item whose value seems trivial. I can imagine a guard not being overly concerned about the fate of a Jackson Pollack painting, before being informed that it's worth millions. I mean it does look like the product of a preschooler to the uninitiated (me).

I believe that this is what Rashi means. SHMIRA is connected to study, because

it is the result of intellectual effort. I cherish, treasure and safeguard mitzvot because I've arrived at the conclusion that they have infinite worth. Then, hopefully, I can cross over to the last two items in the list of activities recited before Sh'ma, namely performance and fulfillment. The latter term implies that I did the deed correctly.

So, what do we mean when we identify someone as SHOMER MITZVOT? I think that we can now state that it doesn't have to mean that the person actually did the mitzva. SHMIRA is an act of cognition. I can be a SHOMER MITZVOT by helping others do mitzvot. I believe strongly that in the famous relationship of Yissachar and Zevulun (Breishit Raba 99:9), Zevulun was SHOMER the mitzva of Torah study without ever opening a book. His support for Yissachar in his studies fulfilled the criteria of SHMIRA. I'm not encouraging the non-performance of mitzvot, but we must acknowledge that supporting and heartening others has its worth as well.

I'd like to think that as a Jewish educator over the years I got some credit for the mitzvot I hopefully inspired others to perform. I remember taking eighth graders to daven VATIKIN (sunrise) at the Kotel. One of these young people didn't really like to daven, but after this experience told me, 'The only sound I heard when I prayed was the flapping of the pigeons' wings. I could swear they were carrying my prayer to heaven.'

Often, there are many partners in a particular mitzva performance. Let's

remember to credit the supporting cast as well as the star performer. As the blind poet John Milton wrote, 'They also serve who only stand and wait.' 🍷

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for Parshat R'ei

Seeing Is...

My wife and I were leaving Rabbi Chaim Brovender's weekly shiur at Yakar recently, and, walking home, Rivka casually asked, 'What did you think of this evening's shiur.'

'It was fabulous,' I gushed.

She was a bit perplexed, because there really hadn't been fireworks during the lecture. We love fireworks. I was born on the Fourth of July, after all. My explanation was simple: I got an idea for an article. When you write every week for 20 years (Yes, that's over a 1000 of these modest efforts.), you're always on the prowl for an idea or insight which can be converted into a 1000-word essay. What happened?

Rabbi Brovender quoted from a Pri Zadik (Reb Zadok of Lublin, 1823-1900) which explained that during the first day of Creation the light was 'good' because God looked at it. The act of looking at the item changes that thing forever. Sitting in the shiur was long-time student of Rav Brovender, Dr. Gerald Shroeder, the noted physicist, who excitedly added, 'That's the Copenhagen interpretation!' And my understanding of the structure of the book of D'varim was changed forever, because these perceptive scholars looked at it.

Let me explain. My previous assump-

tion about how D'varim is organized can be understood from a comment by the Chizkuni (Chizkiyahu bar Manoach, 13th century France). At the beginning of this week's Torah reading, he observes, 'Until this point, Moshe chastised the Jews concerning the awe of God. From here on, he begins to lay out before them the mitzvot' (D'varim 11:24). In other words, the beginning of D'varim contains Moshe's exhortation to be true to God's Torah, combining reminiscences from the forty years in the desert with philosophic material. The operative word in this opening section is 'hear' (like SH'MA YISRA'EL and V'HAYA IM SHAMO'A). From here in chapter 11 until chapter 27, the magic word is 'see'. We begin our initiation into the world of Jewish law by listening to the previous generation. At some point we begin to look at the world for ourselves and apply all the instructions we have heard. Hearing, generally, is the absorption of material from another, while seeing applies to the individual becoming intellectually independent. The end of the book, which is also the end of Moshe's life, returns to words of encouragement, again employs listening carefully to Moshe's exhortation (HA'AZINU).

That all changed with Rav Brovender's quote from Reb Zadok and Dr. Shroeder's reference to the Copenhagen Interpretation. That's the name for the work done by Niels Bohr and his assistant, Werner Heisenberg in the 1920s and comes from a series of lectures given by Dr. Heisenberg in 1955 called 'The Copenhagen Interpretation of Quantum Mechanics'.

Now, I'm an expert on Werner Heisenberg because I've just seen the movie 'The Catcher was a Spy', in which former Jewish catcher for the Boston Red Sox (Yeah, Sox!), Moe Berg, became a spy during World War II, and had to decide whether or not to assassinate Dr. Heisenberg, who was working on Hitler's A-Bomb. He didn't. In any case, I haven't got a clue about most of this stuff, but part of the theory is that observation of a particle changes it. You can't look at a particle without the measuring device interacting with it and changing it irrevocably. This isn't to be confused with the famous Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle, which states that you can't precisely know both the location and velocity of an object. This phenomenon is instead called the 'observer effect'. Well, as I've discussed before, we're observers, too.

Previous to the exchange between Rav Brovender and Dr. Shroeder, I had assumed that R'El in our parsha meant that we acquired the mitzva. Our observance of a mitzva makes it ours. We can't help but change the performance, if only in tiny modifications. Then, through repetition, we repeat the precept in that slightly altered way. This makes the mitzva ours and we pass it on that way to our progeny. This new approach in which we alter the mitzva is subtly different. Now I can say that the slight change to the mitzva is absolutely part of the process. It's a necessary corollary to the observance (double entendre) of the precept. It must be changed by the perpetrator's mere act of looking at it.

Rav Brovender began by asking why Eleazar the Kohen Gadol and son of Aharon is mentioned before Yehoshua in the description of the distribution of tribal portions (Bamidbar 34:17). The kohen really had no role in the conquest of the Holy Land or the assignment of territory. Well, not quite so. Reb Zadok compared this to the participation of the kohen during the ceremony of preparing the purifying waters of the Red Heifer (PARA ADUMA, Bamidbar 19:3). It says that the cow is slaughtered in front of Eleazer (L'FANAV). The Kohen Gadol doesn't do anything in the killing of the heifer, even a non-kohen can do the slaughtering. However, the Kohen Gadol just has to watch. His oversight at that crucial moment is compared by Reb Zadok to God's looking at the light on the first day of Creation, and making it TOV.

Just the looking, observing, supervising of the endeavor makes a difference. Let me tell you, there were many times in my life when my performance was radically changed by someone, a boss or teacher, watching me do it. When Miss Crotty watched me write in the first grade, it was a lot neater than when she was torturing another with her STARE, much like Paddington's Aunt Lucy.

Moshe spends the middle chapters of D'varim relating the mitzvot the Jewish nation will need upon entry into the Land of Israel. When he tells us to SEE these performances as make or break for our future in the Land, he means that we can make these mitzvot

relevant to their time and every future time by taking careful note of the act. Seeing isn't just believing; seeing is changing, adjusting, perfecting. And that can really make things GOOD!

the prophet, we "will be heeding