

For Love or Stuff?

By Rabbi David Wolpe

For too many people, religion is a metaphysical insurance policy. If I do this, God will keep me (pick one) safe, prosperous, happy. Belief rises or falls with the presumed answer to petitions. Prayer becomes a parade of requests, and one's faith pivots on how scrupulously God keeps to the bargain.

Two thousand years ago Antigonos of Socho advised, "Do not be like a slave that serves a master in order to get a prize." Service in the world should be impelled by love, and love should not stoop to calculations. The spontaneous overflow of goodness is what keeps the precarious balance of our communal life; if we tip over into quid pro quo we are doomed. The compensation for goodness can never be bountiful enough for all the decency the world needs.

Spiritual teachers in every generation have emphasized this lesson. Pirke Avoth teaches that "the reward of a mitzvah is a mitzvah." Love of the very action, the thing itself, is the soul's secret spark. As with all sparks, if you cradle your hands around it to keep out some of the world's harshness, it can grow into a flame.