

“Why Do It?”

By Rabbi David Wolpe

Why should one pray, or put on tefillin, or keep kosher, or be part of a Jewish community? All too often Rabbis are inclined to provide reasons which can be weighed and found wanting. We progress through the years not discovering reasons, but accumulating experiences. When the Psalmist writes “Taste and see that God is good,” (Psalm 34) he is teaching that experience is the path to the Divine.

For most of what we choose to do, although we find plausible and even worthy reasons, we are responding less to reason than to the tonality of experience. How does a certain practice play on the strings of our souls?

Jewish law teaches *mitoch shelo lishma, bah lishma*: One can begin doing something for the wrong reason, or for no reason at all, but in time the experience will provide the rationale. It will come to feel important and right. One who regularly prays with devoutness and love might be unable to say why, but will know deeply the power of the practice.

Many of our congregants who come to the Minyan feel confused, or uncertain. But in time, with the regular practice of prayer, they find that it is powerful in unexpected ways. It may be difficult to explain, but it is moving to experience.

When we involve our children in Jewish experiences, we are doing something far more valuable than providing them with reasons. Training a spirit is done not through a rationale, but through a routine.

As A.J. Heschel wrote: “A Jew is asked to take a *leap of action* rather than a *leap of thought*. He is asked to surpass his needs, to do more than he understands in order to understand more than he does. Through the ecstasy of deeds he learns to be certain of the hereness of God. Right living is a way to right thinking.”