



## THE PERSON IN THE PARSHA

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# “I Act, Therefore I Am”

Are you feeling depressed? Then dance!  
Feeling lazy? Work!  
Angry? Smile!  
Hostile? Act friendly!

These are not merely glib bits of advice when there is nothing better to say. Rather, they reflect a deep common wisdom that teaches us that our behavior influences our emotions. When we feel down in the dumps, the best thing we can do is to pretend, however artificially, that we are happy. To smile, to dress well, to be active and enthusiastic. Acting happy is one of the best antidotes for depression.

This insight into the mysterious workings of the human psyche turns out to be more than just common-folk wisdom. In medieval rabbinic literature, it is the unknown author of the Sefer HaChinuch who consistently uses the maxim, "After one's actions, one's feelings follow." For him, this psychological fact is the reason for many of the rituals of Judaism. They are designed to provide us with a pattern of activity which will implant in us a desired set of inner attitudes and feelings.

Thus, for example, all of the many and detailed rituals which comprise the Passover service serve the purpose of stimulating inner

attitudes of freedom and gratitude.

Not only were medieval rabbis aware of this profound psychological truth, but the much later thinkers also prescribed action and activity as a way of influencing one's inner emotional life. William James, more than one hundred years ago, noted in his *Principles of Psychology* that outer behavior has a powerful effect upon internal emotions. In the psychological jargon of the late nineteenth century, this was known as the James/Lange theory.

We all have witnessed this phenomenon in our everyday lives. We know kindergarten teachers whose baby-talk and immature classroom conversational styles have influenced their out-of-school personalities, so that even in adult conversation they demonstrate a peculiar childishness. And I know personally of several *shochetim*, ritual slaughterers, who have consciously fought the tendency toward cruelty to animals, which their profession has instilled in them. The fact that some of the wisest women I know are kindergarten teachers, and some of the gentlest fellows around are *shochetim*, is simply testimony to the efforts they have invested to undoing the powerful impact of the behaviors which they perform every day.

What about the soldier, the person whose task involves violence and the harming of other people? Does his behavior, however necessary to defend his life and the lives of his dear ones, change him into a violent and cruel human being? I think that the answer is yes, and I have spoken to many soldiers who have corroborated this and report feeling hardened

and callous after their battlefield experiences.

It is no wonder then that Pinchas, the hero of this week's Torah portion, after he thrusts a spear through the viscera of a Jewish prince and a Midianite princess, is granted the "covenant of

peace." He committed a bloody act of violence, warranted only in rare and extreme situations, and that single act posed the danger of his deep internal transformation from a priest of peace to a violent murderer. The Almighty found it necessary to bless him with a special gift, His own Divine Brit Shalom.

It was none other than Golda Meir, whose womanly wisdom found expression in the remark, "We can perhaps someday forgive you for killing our children, but we cannot forgive you for making us kill your children."

In the context of recent battles in which the Israeli army was engaged, we must recognize that today's soldiers, to whom I have spoken, resent being forced to kill and are fully aware that violent behavior produces an inner streak of violence that must be expunged. I take this opportunity to stress what we all should know and tell the world, that the Israeli army is uniquely careful to avoid unnecessary acts of violence, and debriefs its soldiers after they emerge from the tests of battle in a manner designed to avoid the incubation of cruel psychological tendencies, and to restore sensitivity toward the lives of others.

There are times when each of us must act sternly, in a tough and harsh manner. Sometimes we must discipline others and be quite strict with them. At those times, we must vigilantly avoid permitting those justified behaviors to affect who we are and how we really feel. We must struggle to retain our humanity, gentleness, and compassion, even when our outer behavior necessitates firmness and even

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severity.

It is also very helpful to remember:

That a tool is available to reverse feelings of violence that threaten to emerge in us, by acting kindly and compassionately;

That we can reverse tendencies towards sloth by energetic productive activity;

And that when we are depressed and emotionally down, the best available prescription is to exuberantly sing and joyously dance. ■

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