

“Don’t Do Me Any Favors” (Shoftim)

“No matter how small and unimportant what we are doing may seem, if we do it well, it may soon become the step that will lead us to better things.” —Channing Pollock

Probably one of the worst displays of helpfulness is half-hearted assistance. Someone offers to do the dishes. You are relieved by the sudden, unexpected and generous help. Your vital time is freed up to tend to other pressing matters. But the person who did the dishes didn’t really want to do them. It was a mock kindness, a weary, lazy effort pretending to be helpful, perhaps seeking the credit for being helpful while really fulfilling a self-serving desire to proclaim the righteousness of the impromptu dishwasher.

You return to the dishes and notice a ring of hardened dirt on one, a splotch of dried grease on another, a discoloration that just won’t come off a third. You now attack the dishes yourself with more energy, force and frustration than you would have without the Good Samaritan’s help. It is probably from such a fear of unenthusiastic offers of help that the phrase “Don’t do me any favors” was born. I traced it to the Yiddish: *“Ti mir nit kayn toyves.”*

God has a similar attitude when it comes to certain aspects of our worship of Him, especially with the more voluntary commandments. Ibn Ezra on Deuteronomy 17:1 highlights this in the prohibition against bringing a blemished animal as a sacrifice. He explains that it is better not to bring anything than to bring a blemished animal. It is as if God is saying, “Don’t do me any favors. If you can’t be bothered to bring Me a pristine animal, if you can’t be bothered to do the commandment properly, don’t do it at all.”

It must be noted that this is a rare view regarding the performance of commandments. A more general philosophy is that even if someone performs a commandment imperfectly, he should continue, in the hope and expectation that he will eventually learn to do it properly. However, in some matters, especially where we can clearly do better, God may take umbrage at a lackadaisical attitude.

May we work harder on the simple things within our reach. They count as well.

Shabbat Shalom,

Ben-Tzion

Dedication

To Nefesh B’Nefesh, and the 100,000 Olim they have helped emigrate to Israel in 24 years.

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