

Walking in the Lord's Ways

In the Book of Leviticus we read:

*If you **follow** my statutes and keep my commandments and observe them faithfully, I will give you your rains in their season, and the land shall yield its produce, and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit. (Lev. 26:3-4; NRSV)*

Most versions read: "If you **follow** my statutes..." However, the Hebrew verb is literally "**walk**". What does this suggest: to walk in the Lord's ways? Is "walking" in Torah's commandments a more active, alert, responsive set of choices than "following"?

Let's taste the insights of Jewish thinkers from a wide range of periods in Jewish history. We begin with the thinking of the revered 11th century Torah scholar Rashi¹ and his sources. When we read "If you follow my statutes", we may think this refers to the fulfilment of the commandments. However, in the next breath the Scripture says, "and observe/keep my commandments". Since the command to observe, keep or fulfil the commandments is already stated, what is the need for the phrase "If you follow my statutes"? What additional meaning does it convey? According to Rashi's interpretation, it means that one must toil (labour, work) in the study of Torah. For since the Hebrew word for "follow" literally means "walk", then this is a strenuous activity. Further, you shall toil in the study of Torah *in order* to observe and fulfil the commandments.

For another opinion, let's listen to the Sefat Emet. This work, by a great 19th century Chassidic rabbi, says this toiling goes beyond the simple acquisition of Torah wisdom. Walking in God's laws means to become so connected to the will of God that the presence of the Almighty becomes manifest on earth. *Thy Kingdom come.*

From Rabbi Hama, living in Galilee around 230 CE, we glean another insight when he asks:

How is it possible for a person to walk in the path of the Shechinah [God's Presence]? Has it not been stated that "the Lord your God is a consuming fire"[see Deut.4:24]? The meaning of walking in the Divine path is to walk in the path of the [ethical] character of the Holy One... As He clothes the needy [as for Adam & Eve, Gen. 3:21] so shall you clothe the needy.²

Rabbi Hama continues:

As the Holy One visits the sick [Abraham in Gen. 18:1] so shall you visit the sick.

As he comforts the mourners [Isaac after his father's death in Gen.25:11] so shall you comfort mourners.

Here, the concept of "walking in God's ways" underpins the human commitment to imitate the Divine by performing acts of loving kindness, also described as *Imitatio Dei* ("Imitation of God"). •

"Toiling, labouring, walking..."

- What kind of effort (walk/toil/labour) am I making to live according to God's ways?
- Notice how the Gospels use 'work' images, such as going into the vineyard, to describe one's relationship to the Kingdom of God.
- Does the 'toil' of discipleship seem 'too much', too demanding, at times? What encouragement can we offer one another?

1. Rashi: French Torah scholar (1040-1105).

2. Babylonian Talmud: Sotah 14a.

Sources: *Rashi: Commentary on the Torah*, Vol. 3 (New York: Mesorah, 1999). The input of R. Pesach Schindler and notes of Br Jack Driscoll cfc are gratefully acknowledged.

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