

Jewish Life

From intention to action

By RABBI AARON LEVY

I recently returned from a conference for rabbis and rabbinical students organized by American Jewish World Service (www.ajws.org), an international, grassroots development organization dedicated to alleviating poverty, hunger and disease among people in the developing world. The central subject of the convention was integrating social justice work into our rabbinates – which is to say, into the ongoing lives of our congregations, campuses and organizations. We discussed methods for engaging our communities in issue education, direct service, effective tzedakah and political advocacy.

I came away from this conference inspired, but inspiration is insufficient. As Jews and as Jewish communities, we – and I include myself in this – talk a great deal about social action and tikkun olam (repairing the world). Our intentions are noble, but good intentions are not enough. To those who need our help for their very survival, it's not thoughts that counts, but our deeds.

In *Sifrei Devarim*, a third-century CE halachic midrash on Deuteronomy, Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah teaches that if someone loses a coin and a poor person finds it, the person who lost

the money is actually considered as if she had given the coin as tzedakah. Although the accidental donor was completely unaware of her own donation – and could not have had any intention

whatsoever with regard to this circumstantial contribution – she has still helped support a needy person and thereby performed the mitzvah of tzedakah. The converse is true as well: intention without

action doesn't help anyone and isn't a mitzvah.

So where does *kavanah* – intention, one's inner focus – fit into all this? *Kavanah* is certainly significant in Judaism, and ideally, we go about our lives constantly fusing action with intention. Furthermore, thoughtfulness and understanding are often practical prerequisites for efficacious action. "A fool cannot be pious," Hillel declared. *Kavanah* is particularly crucial in prayer, as mindless prayer borders on the meaningless. Maimonides, in the *Mishneh Torah*, stated it strongly in the 12th century: "Any prayer without *kavanah* is not prayer."

But in the final analysis, if we must choose one or the other, Judaism clearly values real-world acts over our internal, yet unrealized, plans. "A Jew is asked to take a leap of action rather than a leap of thought," wrote Rabbi Abraham

Joshua Heschel – the prominent 20th-century philosopher and civil rights activist on whose *yahrzeit* (18 Tevet) I'm writing this column.

In the spirit of Shammai's exhortation to "Say little and do much," I'd like to suggest that we each resolve to spend less time talking about social action and more time doing it, and that we bring the same message to the communities in which we're involved. We each need to ask ourselves: how will I translate my inspiration into action? What am I actually going to do to help alleviate the very real suffering that is widespread both around the globe and in my own backyard?

Unfortunately, the world is beset with so many vast problems, it's easy to feel overwhelmed and abandon any hope of making a difference. But as Ruth Messinger, AJWS' president, often rightly retorts: "We cannot retreat to the luxury of being overwhelmed."

In order to have a real effect in others' lives, we need to pick a limited number of critical issues or organizations in which to get involved in meaningful ways and on a sustained basis. Next, we need to figure out a plan for doing this work. And then, individually and collectively, we need to leap into action.

Rabbi Aaron Levy is spiritual leader of the Kiever Synagogue in Toronto and founding director of Makom: Creative Downtown Judaism.

Not a Jewish Arbor Day at all

By RACHAEL TURKIENICZ

In a few weeks, we will celebrate the Jewish holiday of Tu b'Shvat. More and more, Tu b'Shvat is being referred to as the Jewish Arbor Day, probably because environmentalism is politically correct and the "greener" religion can become in the modern world, the more politically correct it is.

What seems almost ironic is that when it comes to environmentalism, the modern politically correct world has not yet caught up to Judaism's awareness of nature and its commandments to protect and guard creation. The Jewish obligation toward the environment is constant and not singled out for one day of celebration.

Arbor Day, which usually occurs in April, is a national holiday in the United States founded by J.S. Morgan in 1872. It's traditionally celebrated with picnics, raising the flag, planting a tree, outdoor school bands and collecting paper for recycling. It's a day to raise awareness of the trees.

Tu b'Shvat is a Jewish festival. It's not a day to raise awareness of the trees, but to mark the date on which to count

another year passing for the trees. This is why it's sometimes referred to as the Birthday of the Trees.

We count these years because the Torah forbids us to take fruit during the first three years of the tree producing

a harvest. For three years, we are to not intrude into its existence, but must respect this new growing creation and allow it to establish itself away from us. The fruit produced in the first three years is called

orlah, and it's not kosher for eating.

In many Jewish homes, this commandment has resulted in not cutting a child's hair for the first three years of life, since our children are our fruit and we allow the new creation to establish itself with life and strength.

Once the tree has entered its fourth year, we are commanded to tithe the fruit and bring some of it to the poor. Because there is no Temple today, tithing is affected, but the prohibition of eating *orlah* remains in place. We need Tu b'Shvat to give us a birthday for the trees, a reference point.

This reference point of counting and then tithing allows us to place ourselves

in relation to the trees, to nature, to each other and to God. We may plant the tree, but ultimately it's an independent creation and we're barred from interfering while it establishes its life and its seed. Before we partake of its fruit, we must remember our connection to God and our obligation to each other. Only afterward are we permitted to benefit from the natural bounty.

As is true for any birthday, it can be a day for parties that comes and goes, or it can be a reference point on which we remind ourselves of our maturing relationships and priorities in connection with nature, our spirituality and our fellow human beings.

Our connection to the trees starts on the very day that we are created. We can't resist eating from the Tree of Knowledge, and we're barred from Eden, lest we also eat from the Tree of Life. But even exile from Eden doesn't keep us from being drawn to the trees as we sing of the Torah: "She is a Tree of Life to those who hold her with strength."

On Tu b'Shvat celebrate the trees by remembering the Jewishness of the day and our symbiotic Jewish relationship with trees. There's time for Arbor Day – April is just around the corner.



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