

Walk, not Talk: Thoughts on Parashat Behukotai

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By

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Behukotai

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A man who lives near our synagogue recently attended an evening service in order to say kaddish in memory of his father. Although we almost always have a minyan present, that night we had a problem. The weather was bad, some of our "regulars" were out of town--we only had eight men at services.

Our guest was agitated and angry. He had come to say kaddish, but we were not able to provide him this opportunity. He stomped angrily out of the synagogue, indignant that we did not have a minyan when he needed one.

Yes, it is a pity that we missed minyan that night.

But who was this man who was so angry at us? He was a neighbor of the synagogue who has lived nearby for many years. Yet, he is not a member of the synagogue and has not contributed even one cent to the synagogue for all these years. He never attends the synagogue, except when he needs to say kaddish. Although he has done nothing to strengthen the synagogue or to bolster our minyan (except when he needs to say kaddish), he expects the synagogue to be there to serve him at his convenience; he expects ten men to be at services whenever he deigns to show up.

He feels that he has a right to benefit from the synagogue, even though he does nothing to help the synagogue maintain itself. He was indignant that ten men didn't show up for him to say kaddish, even though he never shows up to help make minyan for others. He feels entitled to take, but doesn't feel responsible to give.

This week's Torah portion begins with the words: "If you walk in My statutes." The Torah might have said: if you observe My statutes, or if you keep My statutes." Why does it use the word "walk?"

Rabbi Hayyim Palache, a sage of 19th century Izmir, explained that when the Torah commands us to "walk" in God's ways, it means that we are to be active participants. We are not supposed to wait for opportunities to fulfill mitzvot, but we are urged to "walk", to actively seek ways of doing that which is right and good.

To "walk" in God's statutes means that we actively take part in religious life, that we happily and eagerly accept responsibility to do our share as part of the community. It means that we pay our way, and do our best, and participate as well as we can.

Some people somehow think that they are entitled to benefit from synagogues or other communal institutions, even though they do not participate in maintaining those institutions. Who exactly is supposed to pay the bills? Who exactly is supposed to attend daily services and make minyan every morning and evening? These people don't really care, as long as the responsibility doesn't devolve on their shoulders. Let others provide!

The Torah portion reminds us to "walk" in God's statutes, to participate actively, happily and responsibly in maintaining a vibrant Jewish religious life. Those who shirk the responsibility and privilege of "walking" in God's ways deprive themselves of the satisfaction and self-respect that come with ethical, righteous religious living.

Synagogues and communal institutions don't exist just through wishful thinking. Minyanim don't happen just from good intentions. If we each do not do our share, we have no right to expect others to pick up the slack for us.

Let us "walk" in God's statutes. It's an important key to personal happiness and communal strength. What is needed is "walk," not "talk."

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