

Can Jewish education really change the world?

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Extracts from interview with Rabbi Natan Levy - 11 March 2015

MP: So you're working with kids in an Orthodox school and you're trying to convince them that recycling the plastic bottle is the mitzvah – that's what you're talking about? ... One way of understanding that is to say that if you can convince ... every additional child that you can convince to recycle one plastic bottle, if you can convince enough children to recycle enough bottles, that will have a concrete impact on the world ...

NL: But I don't know if I get into it that way, *lo lehibatel mimenu* [do not desist from it]¹, it's not the end goal, it's like I have a piece of work to do which is this plastic bottle's a problem. One less plastic bottle in the mouth of some sort of sea bird is going to be a really good thing, for that sea bird. And you just work on that piece, for that child. Please don't throw away this plastic bottle here in front of you. Will it add up, the whole thing? No, not really. Even if I got the entire Stamford Hill, all those schools, and I've only been to a few of them, all those schools would start recycling immediately at one hundred percent, that's like one afternoon in Beijing. That's it, finished, right? So we can't think about it that way because there are only thirteen million Jews. Even if I got every Jew recycling, it's still one day in Beijing uses it up.

And if you got all the Jews doing it and it became an or lagoyim [light to the nations] would that make a difference?

Maybe that would make a difference, but I don't think you can think about it that way either. Somehow I think the way you do *mitzvot*, like, this is very Aish Hatorah style, or Chabad even, like *shlichim* [Chabad emissaries] will spend hours getting one guy to wrap *tefilin*. It's not like a huge wave of influence, but they don't think about it that way. Here's someone, you need to wrap *tefilin*, and they've been put in that time and that place to get that guy to wrap *tefilin*. I feel the same way around the kind of education we're doing around social justice, which is, there's a child who has a bottle in their hand. What do they do with it? Keeping it at that level.

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Tell me what you hope is going to happen as the result of the process you're engendering. What's going to happen to or within that child?

I guess it's more *maaseh* [deed] than *makhshovah* [thought]. They won't throw the bottle away, they'll recycle it. I don't care what's going on in their heart, to some degree. Throwing

¹ A reference to Mishnah Avot 2:16: 'It is not incumbent on you to finish the task but you are not free to desist from it.'

the bottle away, maybe that's the end goal. Sorry, recycling. If they're changed internally ... don't know. I have a hard time with that.

Do you care?

I don't think it's the primary thing. What's that line about what's more important, *limmud* [learning] or *ma'asim* [deeds], in the Gemorah², right? What's more important, learning Torah or doing action. They say learning is more important because it leads to action, which is a strange twist, right? So yeah the learning is a key, only because it leads to the action. So really the focus is on learning, but only because it's going somewhere. And I think about that often, like my teaching has to be very good because I'm trying to get that top [?] of the plastic, to get it into the right spot.

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Does your work come together with your critique? In other words, what's the connection between the work that you do, personally, and your critique of really what's wrong with the world?

So a friend of mine told me a *hadith* about the little bird – have you heard this one? A little bird who goes with his beak full of water ...

I haven't heard it, no.

So it's about Abraham in the fiery furnace and this little bird with a little beak full of water keeps dropping the water, and the other birds, the other animals just laughing, the bird can't do anything. And the bird returns to the other birds and the other animals and says at the end of days, Allah's not going to ask me whether I put out the fire, he's going to ask me what did I do when the fire was burning. That's a nice little way of ...

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Are you interested in whether your actions are effective or not? Like the bird dropping the water, right.

The bird's not so interested in how effective its actions are. It doesn't even ask itself am I doing the most effective action. For better or for worse, it's just acting. So sometimes I think it's just good to act, because it's so easy to become somnolent, just to fall asleep at the wheel. Most people I talk to, specially some ... most people don't care at all and they've lost interest or desire, and so I feel like they just need to move, and do one small piece today, not the right piece, I'll try it and see if it works. If it doesn't work, I'll learn.

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² Babylonian Talmud, Kiddushin 40b: 'Rabbi Tarfon and some elders were reclining in an upper chamber in the house of Nitza in Lod when this question came up: Which is greater, study or action? Rabbi Tarfon spoke up and said: Action is greater. Rabbi Akiva spoke up and said: Study is greater. The others then spoke up and said: Study is greater because it leads to action.'

Is there a problem giving people a sense everything's going to be OK and hope while the world's burning?

No, I think the opposite is much worse. I'd rather have them overly hopeful than just totally lethargically giving in. If you had to push in one direction or another. Isn't that sort of what Judaism's about? Again and again, Jews shouldn't be in the world. Egypt, the Second Temple, that's a really bad moment, we should have been done by that, according to all modern theories of history and people and culture and civilisation, we should have been done long ago, and we're still going strong, maybe because we had an over-inflated sense of hope. Maybe you can't have too much hope. Is that possible?

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Talking about it makes me realise that perhaps I don't have it that clear.... Like I'm really into action, that's really the most important thing, but I think, as you said, people have to vision something really good about the world, a meaningful world, and without that they lose, it's hard to keep focused. You can do one good act but you're not going to be able to keep going every day, it's going to get hard unless you really have something, internally have something.