

The Afterlife of Our Actions

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Will Israel receive all the rain it needs this coming year? It depends on whether we are faithful to God's word. At least that is the claim made in a biblical passage that we recite twice a day as part of the Shema:

If, then, you obey the commandments that I have enjoined upon you this day, loving the Lord your God and serving Him with all your heart and soul, I will grant the rain for your land in season, the early rain and the late. . . Take care not to be lured away and serve other gods and bow to them. For the Lord's anger will flare up against you, and He will shut up the skies so that there will be no rain. . . ([Deut. 11:13-14, 16-17](#))

Many of us are uncomfortable reciting these verses. We live in a scientific age. We look to science, in this case meteorology, to explain the weather. Moreover, our experience of the world belies Deuteronomy's claim. It rains or it doesn't. People fulfill the commandments or they don't; they commit atrocities or great acts of kindness. There is no observable link between the two. And even if one were to grant the premise of Deuteronomy, the tone of these words sound like a threat—"the Lord's anger will flare up against you"—which some of us find demeaning. We are fine with being told that it is important to fulfill God's commands, but we don't want to be bullied into it.

When I recite these verses I do not experience them as a threat. I see them as a vital reminder that the effects of the good and evil we do are not limited to the moment in which we act. Our actions have consequences far beyond that moment, and most of them are beyond our control. If I spread gossip about you, I hurt you not only in the moment that I tarnish your reputation in the mind of the hearer. He will undoubtedly tell others who will in turn tell others. I

cannot control the ripple effects of my act of denigration, nor of anything else I do, for better or for worse.

Of course this is true not only of sin, but of good deeds as well. Shakespeare got it wrong when he had Anthony say, in his funeral oration for Julius Caesar, "The evil that men do lives after them; the good is oft interred with their bones." (*Julius Caesar*, Act 3, Scene 2). Good has an afterlife just as vigorous as that of evil.

I share with you a small but moving example of this truth. In our family we tell the story of my cousin Shira who, every Shabbat after services, puts away any prayer books that have not been returned to their proper place. She does so because she observed our grandfather, a man who was dedicated to prayer and synagogue life, carefully restore order to the sanctuary after the congregants had left. One Shabbat a few years back, she noticed that a young man who had recently moved into town was engaging in the same task. She approached him and complained, tongue-in-cheek, that he was taking away her job. He explained that many years ago he had studied for his bar mitzvah with a man by the name of Mr. Weiss. He had seen him return the prayer books to their shelves week after week and was inspired to follow his example. Mr. Weiss, of course, was Shira's and my grandfather.

I also regard the very implausibility of rainfall depending on human behavior as calling me to reflect that the results of our actions are not only often unknowable but often unforeseeable. Consider the story of David and Ahimelekh. In [I Samuel, Chapters 21-22](#), we read how David, fleeing Saul's wrath, maneuvers the priest Ahimelekh into unwittingly aiding him in his escape by providing him with food and a sword. One of Saul's generals, Doeg the

Edomite, overhears their conversation and reports it to Saul. In a paranoid rage, Saul orders the death not only of Ahimelekh, but also of 85 of his fellow priests. When Saul gives the order for the priests to be killed, none of his men steps forward. Finally, it is Doeg who does the deed. I wonder what went through Doeg's mind. Did he regret having informed on Ahimelekh now that it had resulted in his killing of innocent men? In any case, he was ensnared by the unforeseeable consequences of his words.

We need not let our theological differences with Deuteronomy blind us to the deep truth underlying its words: Until we act, we are the master of our actions. Once we *do* act, they master us.

This commentary originally appeared in 2015.