

Shoot first, draw the target later
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“Do. Or do not. There is no ‘try.’”

– Yoda

Proposition: There is absolutely no reason for anyone to pursue a life of religious meaning unless he or she is head-over-heels in love with it.

Forget for a moment about “doing it because God wants us to.” If we were smart enough to know what God wants, we’d also be smart enough to deal with God’s apparently contradictory messages. Besides, I know enough happy and righteous atheists and agnostics to see that theology doesn’t necessarily lead to ethical contentment.

We practice our religions because we love them. Like a good friend, spouse or partner, they help us make sense of the world. They comfort us when we need comforting and challenge us when we need challenging: helping us break through our walls of self-importance, prejudice, and ignorance and connect to something bigger. Living a religious life isn’t easy, especially if it’s new to us. As rational, methodical beings creeping through the dawn of the 21st century, we like to plan in detail before acting. Charging into something, without first plotting every possible step, is antithetical to our modern minds. But I’ve come to believe that’s the most effective method of adopting religious or spiritual practice. Sometimes, it’s better to do something first and observe what happens.

The Torah offers an example of this approach: When Moses first reads the Ten Commandments (and a few others besides) to the people at Mount Sinai, the people respond in one voice: “Na’aseh v’nishmah (we will do and listen/understand)!”

This seems backwards, and not only from a modern perspective. The ancient rabbis also puzzled about it, saying, “The Israelites made their action precede their hearing, for if one hears, but does not intend to do, it would be better had he not been created ... From this also derives the saying: ‘He whose works exceed his wisdom, his wisdom will endure’” (Midrash Ha-Gadol).

Sociologists tell us that even before 9/11 a huge spiritual renaissance had been sweeping this country, especially in terms of people rediscovering or reclaiming the religion of their childhood. But that quest often means facing the child-sized baggage that may have driven us away from our religion in the first place. How do we jump back in without feeling self-conscious?

First: It doesn’t matter where we jump, as long as we engage more than just our minds. Take communion; light Shabbat candles; pray five times a day toward Mecca. Whatever your tradition bids you do on a regular enough basis to make it a habit. Start small – you can always add something later.

Second: So what if you’re self-conscious? Engaging your soul takes practice. Something might feel right the first time, forced the next, natural the hundredth. You won’t know unless you do it – because *until* you do it, you’ll have no idea what it means.

As the philosopher Charles Fort said, “One measures a circle, beginning anywhere.” One measures a soul the same way.