

We Must Buy It
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Well, we've finally broken down and we're going to buy an HD TV. We love television so we're finally giving in to it. We've made the decision, but let me tell you it wasn't easy. Two weeks ago, I watched the first quarter of the Eagles game and then went to a friend's house to watch the second quarter on his 42-inch high-definition plasma TV. The difference between the two was like night and day. It was at that moment that I decided we needed to at least explore the possibility of purchasing one. So, my wife set out on a fact-finding mission and we started our due diligence. We searched on-line, we went to stores, and we educated ourselves. We did some calculations about cost, taxes, shipping, set up etc... Based on our budget, we re-evaluated and then we had to decide. Even though we spent countless hours investigating, the time came when we had to ask ourselves, "Are we going to buy it or not?"

In fact, in our first attempt to purchase a TV, we got cold feet and just couldn't pull the trigger. Look, it's a lot of money, so we had to be right with it. The whole way home we kept repeating the words, "It's a big investment and we have to be right with it. I kept hearing the imaginary sales person in my ear saying "So, are you going to buy it or not?" At some point, you just have to decide whether or not you're going to jump in. So we did a little more research, just to make sure we would be doing the best we could, and then Missy made the decision. Most of us try to get ourselves intellectually ready for what our heart really wants. I really wanted the TV set, but could we really afford it? Something inside kept drawing me away. We said, "but we don't need it." So, we decided to donate our old TV set. In this way we could justify replacing something that wasn't broken. We did all the mental acrobatics we could to get our minds in line with our hearts. Most of us must perform these intellectual exercises so we can align our hearts with our minds. However, at some point you have to decide whether to buy it or not. This is also so true of much in our lives. It's true of relationships and it's true of Judaism.

I know I've told you this story before, but I love it. When I was a teenager, my father decided he was going to start blessing us at the Friday Night Shabbat dinner table. It was weird at first, but he was determined to make it happen. No matter how much we made fun of him or this ritual, common by today's standards, we just didn't buy it. Finally, his determination and his iron will won out. He sold it to us. Eventually, we gave in and just let him do it. Today, on the rare occasion that I receive one, I actually like it. However, the only real reason I bought it was because he sold it. He meant it, and he was determined we would also. That is the message for today. If our relationships and our Judaism are going to work, then we've got to make that determination and really buy it.

This wonderful holiday is a holiday of great joy. After the intense seriousness of the high holidays and the deep and heavy meditations about life and death, we need a reprieve and we need to celebrate. That's precisely why we have the holiday of Sukkot. In all honesty, we do some pretty bizarre things. First, we build a little hut in our backyards and then we move out there. Then we come to the synagogue and pick up palm branches and wave them about. Although there are some very good historical and etymological explanations for these rituals, it

really does look odd, even to the insider who takes a step back. The rabbis spend lots of time drawing lessons about what these symbols mean, and how we might learn bigger lessons about the way we interact with each other, and about how we understand ourselves. “Each component of the lulav and the etrog,” says the Rabbis, “represents a different type of person or a different aspect of one’s personality. Once you get past all the peculiarities of these holidays, there are laws that offer us great insight into, not just religious life, but how our lives in general terms can be affected, through an awareness brought on by an observant life.

There’s a wonderful law, explained in “Midrash Hagodal,” about the need to purchase our own lulav. Says, Midrash HaGadol on the first day of the holiday, “One must own their own lulav to fulfill the commandment of taking up the lulav.” So, to be absolutely clear about the subject, the Midrash goes on to say, “*Im ratza, notno matanah l’chaveiro v’chaveiro l’chaveiro afilu im hein meah.*” If one wants, he can give it freely as a gift to another and that person may gift that lulav in kind if they would like. However, it must be given to them so that it is theirs. Then they illustrate the legal principle with a story about Raban Gamliel, Reb Yehoshua, Reb Elazar ben Azarya, and Rabbi Akiva, who were all on a boat together. They had gifted and re-gifted their lulav to each other so they might fulfill the commandment of taking up the lulav on the holiday of Sukkot. I suppose that may be the origin of re-gifting. You see, I told you we invented everything. Anyway... the principle is clear and we must buy it ourselves. We can’t just decide, “I don’t want to spend the money, I don’t want to fully participate.” We have to make the decision that we’re going to make the investment, both figuratively and quite literally. Says this Midrash, “We have to make an investment in our faith and if we want to be people of faith, we’re going to have to buy into the system.”

Sure it seems odd to wave a palm branch around. Sure, just as the weather begins to turn cold we go outside and build a little hut to eat and sleep in, but Rabbis remind us that if you want to be a part of the system there has to be a certain buy in. In the synagogue, we talk all the time about how to get people to participate in our programs, how to get them to come to class, how to get them to come to services, and how to get people to volunteer? The answer we come back to time and again is that we need to get people’s buy in. They have to feel as though they’re valued and that they have a unique contribution to make. I know the language is the language of economics - and not of faith - but the analogy works. Faith is something that you just have to decide you want to have and then you must secure it. It isn’t something that is given—it’s something that has to be acquired. The same is true of relationships.

Many of us find ourselves in relationships. We have friends and we have spouses, we have children and we have parents. Sometimes they let us down and sometimes they offer explanations for why they have disappointed us. Sometimes there is a resulting argument, and rarely, through that conversation, is a resolution found. However, more often than not, all the talking in the world doesn’t make a bit of difference. What makes a difference is the fact we decide to let it go. We decide at some point that we are going to drop the issue. We’re simply going to accept that person again. We must decide to buy what they’re saying and let go of the anger. Intellectually, we may think they aren’t sorry, however, we must decide to move on. To be forgiving really has nothing to do with the other person. When you forgive, you let someone off the hook so it doesn’t really matter what they say or do. Relationships may require us to

suspend absolute consistency and integrity. Relationships can sometimes demand we permit hypocrisy.

The Midrash ends by saying, “*l’lamedeachakama hayu zhirim ba’mitzvot.*” This law comes to teach how incredibly important mitzvot are. This midrash concludes by reminding us how important the system is. Faith is so powerful, faith in God and faith in each other. We must believe in God and we must find a way to believe in each other--even if it requires a leap of faith. However, we must begin with some action. That’s why Heschel says, “Don’t worry about faith, take a leap of action.” Doing something will often get us to believe in something. Act like you believe and, eventually, you’ll believe in how you act. If our relationships and our Judaism is going to work, then we have to make that determination and really buy it. If we want our children to have it, then we’re going to have to buy it ourselves -- and then we are going to have sell it.

I often tell stories about my family. My kids vie to be the subject of a sermon, so I try to accommodate. The problem is that some of the things they do are so outlandish it appears as though they couldn’t have possibly done or said what I said they did. You might say to yourself, “They couldn’t be as entertaining as he says they are.” So, you think I embellish a little? You might think that I add a line that they might have meant but didn’t say. You may think that I might say one kid did something while another child seems the more likely culprit. Either way you wonder about the truthfulness of what I am saying. Sometimes my kids will even say, “Did that really happen?” To which I always assure them that it did actually happen, they just don’t remember it.

In almost every aspect of our lives, there’s a need to believe in the truthfulness and the authenticity of the experience. When we go to the theater, or read a great book, to appreciate the message and to understand the lesson, we must either believe the story or the story must be based on a true story – or we must simply decide to suspend our disbelief. There is the theory in literary that suggests to truly enjoy that which you are reading, there must be a suspension of disbelief. To focus on the material and enjoy the entertainment, maybe even the deeper message, the reader must decide that there are certain aspects of the story that we must not question. If we want to believe in the ultimate triumph of good over evil, if that is a belief we need at our core of beliefs, than we permit Superman to fly and leap tall buildings in a single bound. If we want to be transported to another world and learn lessons about how we are supposed to treat each other, then we become willing travelers on Mister Rogers little train to the Land of Make Believe. You just have to decide you are going to buy it. I can’t convince you of the existence of God through logical algorithms and I can’t persuade you about the value of healthy relationships – but once you buy it, the whole worlds open up. Once you accept it, there is no buyer’s remorse. At some point, whenever you make a purchase, you must make that decision. Whenever we are going to make a big purchase, we have to, at some point, jump in and make the purchase--at some point you have to decide whether or not you are going to buy it.

I pray that of all the purchases we make this year, our investment in our faith and in our relationships will yield the greatest dividend.