

LISTENING, UNDERSTANDING, AND GROUTING

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The grout around our bathroom sink was terribly cracked and chipping away so faced with the prospect of paying a professional a pricey sum for what otherwise seemed a relatively minor repair, I took to my favorite educational guide: Youtube. God bless that website. There were any number of DIY grouting videos which covered the tools required, supplies needed, the application technique preferred, and the estimated time of the project.

It was terrifying.

Oh well, what was the worse that could happen? I followed the instructions as carefully as possible and though the whole operation took five times longer than the video (video: 8 minutes; actual application time: 40 minutes) I did it, and you know—it looks pretty good. I have since been scanning the house for other grouting projects.

Whence this newfound confidence wholly disproportionate to any actual expertise? It's a reality about how we come to know things. Some people seemingly know what to do by merely listening, but a deeper listening, one that results in understanding, stems from doing. The Children of Israel knew this. We read in this week's parashah, Mishpatim (translation: Laws): "Moshe took the record of the Covenant and read it aloud to (literally: b'oznei or "into the ears of) the people, who responded, 'All that the Lord has spoken, we will do and we will hear'" (Exodus 24:7).

That last clause seems a bit off. Generally, people first hear and then they do, contrary to the verse which places the doing before the hearing. But the Torah here is teaching us a great truth about the Torah's way of life, which is that we come to understand better not by merely hearing, but by doing what we have heard, that is, by living its rules and regulations.

Mishpatim covers a great many laws (53 mitzvot by some counts), one which addresses the Hebrew slave unwilling to go free. Since his master cannot force him to go free, he takes the slave to court and in public session pierces his ear. Ouch. What's that all about? The rabbis explain. This slave stood at Sinai. There he heard "the Children of Israel shall serve Me [read: the Lord]," yet the slave still craves a human master. Had the slave only conquered his fears, faced the insecurity that freedom generates, he might have learned how a life dedicated to the intangible Master of all is far superior to enslavement to the very tangible master of flesh and blood. The slave had to go out and "do," in order to fully "hear," how a life dedicated to God is freedom itself. The slave's ear is thus punished, and he becomes a slave forever.

What is true of so many different aspects of life is true of Jewish tradition itself. And if you are bold enough, if you are willing to take up the challenge, you might consider a ritual or tradition that you have never done (lighting Shabbat candles, putting on tefillin, reciting Shema morning or evening or both, etc.) and see where a single sacred routine may take you. As for the cracking grout around your house, I make this exclusive offer to the Westchester Jewish Community: I am available. I would be delighted to come over to your home, inspect the situation, and then explain exactly how to go about doing the job yourself, because the greatest understanding, the deepest "hearing," comes from doing.