

Words and Deeds

BY RABBI DAVID WOLPE

Jewish tradition is full of argument, but argument is not its essence. Judaism is a system devoted to the sacred deed.

Mitzvot in all their array — ritual, ethical, colorful, mundane, God-directed, human-centered — are the central stuff of Judaism. What cannot be said can be enacted. The meaning of Shabbat candles is ultimately inexpressible; lighting is the language of ritual, at once less articulate and yet deeper than any words.

In George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, Mrs. Farebrother comments, "When you get me a good man made out of arguments, I will get you a good dinner with reading you the cookery book." The most adroit Talmudic disputations alone will not make someone good. Action outstrips erudition.

In the Talmud we are told that the *mitzvot* are given "only to refine human character." The *mitzvah*, done right, shapes our souls. Each time we act in a godly manner it reinforces the characteristics in us that are nobler and better. So argue away — it is a good and venerable enviable. But we should not lose sight of the fact that the words we speak matter less than the deeds we do.