

## Is Being Good the Most Important Thing in Judaism?

by Rabbi Dr. Nachum Amsel

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From a very young age, parents teach their children to be a "good boy" or "good girl." Everyone usually aspires to be a good person, and according to studies, almost every individual thinks of himself or herself as a "basically good person." We all want to do "the right thing" in every situation, and help others when possible. Yet, when these acts of goodness are pitted against other values that are highly regarded by society -- such as amassing money, attaining success and power, having fun or other, similar values -- goodness and acting ethically often take a back seat and fade from the forefront of priorities. How important is goodness in Judaism? As in every society, within Judaism there are competing Jewish values such as Torah learning and performing mitzvot— commandments, rituals and beliefs. How does "goodness" and proper behavior towards others stack up in the hierarchy of Jewish values? How much of a Jewish priority is being a good person and how important a goal is it for each Jew to attain?

### **IN JUDAISM, ACTING MORALLY AND HELPING OTHERS IS THE HIGHEST VALUE**

Judaism, as will be shown through numerous sources, places caring about others and acting benevolently towards other people as the absolute highest priority of the religion. From Scripture to the Talmud to the Midrash and beyond, the value of behaving ethically towards other human beings describes the essence of being Jewish. For example, when declaring which one principle epitomizes Judaism, Rabbi Akiva states it is the verse, known to many: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."<sup>1</sup> He mentions nothing about G-d, beliefs, or man-to-G-d mitzvot in describing the essence of Judaism. Rather, only good behavior towards one's fellow man. In a similar vein, Hillel was forced to encapsulate all of Judaism to the potential convert standing on one foot. Hillel stated essentially the same thing as Rabbi Akiva, except he couched the idea in a more negative but practical manner: Do not do to your neighbor what you would not want to have done to you.<sup>2</sup> He continues and says that all the rest of Judaism is only commentary upon this one essential principle and that the convert should now go learn all of the Torah.

The Torah itself also emphasizes this concept. It tells us<sup>3</sup> not merely to attain it, but to run after and pursue righteousness (sometimes mistranslated as "justice"). This is commonly understood to signify that each Jew should insure that he or she should do the right thing in every situation, i.e., specifically between man and man. The Torah emphasizes the importance of this notion in the verse in two different ways: it repeats the word "righteousness" twice, and it also tells us to run after this concept. In no other place in the Torah (and in only one instance in the Psalms, about pursuing peace) does G-d use the term "run after it." Jews are not commanded to run after keeping Kosher or run after eating Matzah on Passover. Only with regard to treating others in the right manner must one actively pursue this goal. The prophet Micah also informs us exactly what G-d wants from each Jew: to do justice and kindness as one walks modestly with G-d. According to the commentaries,<sup>4</sup> this refers only to those commandments that pertain to our goodness and how well we treat our fellow man.

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<sup>1</sup> Jerusalem Talmud, Nedarim 30b

<sup>2</sup> Shabbat 31a

<sup>3</sup> Deuteronomy 16:20

<sup>4</sup> Micah 6:8 and Ibn Ezra commentary

In addition to the many individual commandments mandating proper behavior between Jews and others, there is one over-arching commandment, a general mitzvah that covers all man to man situations not specifically enumerated in the rest of the Torah. This mitzvah-commandment "to keep the straight path and do what is right" is given so that the Jew is aware all the times, in every situation, that Jewish behavior mandates doing what is good and right.<sup>5</sup> In another verse commanding the Jew to do the "straight and right thing,"<sup>6</sup> the Midrash<sup>7</sup> explains that this refers specifically to how a Jew behaves towards others in business, and then states that any Jew who treats others properly in commerce, it is as if that person has fulfilled the entire Torah.

Just as proper behavior to others is the most important aspect of Judaism and of life in general, the lack of this behavior can bring disastrous results. The people in Noah's generation, for example, committed many horrible sins, but the destruction of the entire world through the Flood came about only when the people began stealing from each other en masse.<sup>8</sup> The great Vilna Gaon states the importance of goodness in simple terms. He says<sup>9</sup> that the essential purpose of life is to constantly improve one's character and act morally towards others. If not, what is the purpose of living? Another way to evaluate Judaism's hierarchy of values is to see how a person will be judged after one's life in this world is completed. The Talmud declares that a Jew will be asked a series of questions to assess his or her life.<sup>10</sup> The very first question a person will be asked after death will not be about Yom Kippur, proper feeling in prayer, or even about belief in G-d. The first question will be, "Were you honest in your business dealings?"

As generations of Jews began to decline morally after the Sinai experience, King David advised that Jews should concentrate on eleven specific virtues, all of them between man and man.<sup>11</sup> That Talmudic passage continues and explains that as time passed, moral decline increased. The prophet Micah streamlined the focus from eleven Jewish principles down to three areas: to judge truthfully, to do acts of kindness, and to perform the mitzvot-commandments without ostentation before others. Seeing yet a further decline, the prophet Jeremiah encouraged the people to focus on just two aspects: to do justice and to give Tzedaka-charity. All the prophets stressed what the quintessential element of Judaism entails -- behaving ethically with others. This quality of kindness is so crucial to Judaism that the Midrash says that anyone who denies the importance of kindness denies the entire Torah.<sup>12</sup>

## **ROLE MODELS FOR JEWS**

In pointing to nearly every admirable individual both in the Scripture and in the Talmud, the role models of Jewish life were based almost solely on how they interacted with human beings, and not on how they interacted with G-d. The very first Jew, Abraham, is singled out for being special because he would teach his children (and they would in turn teach their children, until today) about kindness and the importance of justice and righteousness.<sup>13</sup> This verse is placed in the Torah right before Abraham argues with G-d about the five cities of evil people (including Sodom) that G-d was about to destroy, when Abraham convinced G-d not to destroy them if there were only 10 righteous men living in the cities. And Abraham had never even met any of the

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<sup>5</sup> Deuteronomy 6:18 with Nachmanides commentary

<sup>6</sup> Exodus 15:26

<sup>7</sup> Midrash Mechilta Beshalach 1

<sup>8</sup> Sanhedrin 120a

<sup>9</sup> Even Shlaima 1:2

<sup>10</sup> Shabbat 31a

<sup>11</sup> Makkot 24a

<sup>12</sup> Midrash Yalkut Shimoni Shmuel Aleph 25:134, Midrash Shmuel 23:8

<sup>13</sup> Genesis 18:19

people in these cities who would shortly die! Almost every other leadership figure in the Torah is also described in terms of man-to-man kindness, and not piety to G-d. Moses, known as Moshe Rabbeinu -- Moses our teacher -- is never lauded in the Torah about his vast Jewish knowledge or great teaching abilities. Rather, he is praised for his unique kindness and sense of justice, even for people he did not know and even for non-Jews (Exodus 2:11-19). This characteristic of kindness is present in almost every Torah leader, including Judah, Miriam, Yocheved, the new Elders and others. (See the chapter on "[Jewish Leadership](#)" for a detailed discussion of this point.)

This idea and its importance in Judaism have been passed down until today. The Chofetz Chaim, who lived in the twentieth century, writes<sup>14</sup> that the path referred to in the above verse by Abraham, is the path of kindness that has guided every Jew since his time. This echoes the Talmudic passage<sup>15</sup> that states that the verse in Exodus declared the path of the Jewish people signifies kindness. One of the great Torah luminaries who died only about a hundred year ago, Rabbi Chaim Soloveitchik, developed a new and unique way of how to learn Talmud with a methodology called the "Brisker" method. He was a Torah genius. Nevertheless, the words written on his grave mention neither his Torah greatness nor his genius. Rather, they merely state "Master of Kindness."

### **G-D AS A ROLE MODEL**

When the Torah commands the Jews to follow the ways of G-d, the Talmud asks<sup>16</sup> how it is possible for a man of flesh and blood to be like the Creator of the Universe. It answers that Jews are commanded to imitate G-d's characteristics. Which characteristics of G-d are we meant to imitate? The answer is clearly that we should perform His acts of kindness that show caring about other people, such as giving clothing to those who lack clothes, visiting the sick and comforting the mourner. Later on, that same Talmudic page says<sup>17</sup> that the beginning of the Torah has the story of G-d's kindness to man (when G-d gave clothing to an undeserving Adam and Eve) and also at the end of the Torah is an instance of G-d's kindness to a man (when G-d buried Moses), implying that everything in between these two stories should also be connected to kindness as this is the essence of G-d and the Torah. Thus, the Torah teaches us (the word "Torah" technically translates as "that which teaches us") to follow G-d's lead and be kind always.

In the weekday *Shmoneh Esreh*-Silent Prayer that traditional Jews recite three times daily, G-d's ongoing kindness to all human beings in the world every day, all the time, are lauded.<sup>18</sup> In the first blessing, G-d is described as a G-d who grants great kindnesses constantly, and in the second blessing, G-d is described in many ways, but in particular as One who sustains the world economically, lifts up those who have fallen, heals the sick, and frees those who are bound. Chofetz Chaim summarizes all of the above ideas and urges the Jew to imitate G-d<sup>19</sup> by practicing these traits shown to man by G-d.

### **ADDITIONAL INSIGHTS ABOUT THE CENTRALITY OF GOODNESS IN JUDAISM**

Beside the sources brought above, many other sources confirm that being moral and acting with kindness and goodness towards others are the central themes of Judaism. Yet too many Jews and non-Jews do not see nor practice Judaism in this way. And even fewer internalize these ideas and translate them into daily action (though there are some great and noble people who are the exceptions). Thus, it is important to stress how crucial and significant this behavior is for the practicing Jew.

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<sup>14</sup> Ahavat Chesed, Introduction 2

<sup>15</sup> Bava Kama 100a

<sup>16</sup> Deuteronomy 13:5, 28:9, Sotah 14a

<sup>17</sup> Sotah 14a

<sup>18</sup> Shmoneh Esreh, Blessings #1, #2

<sup>19</sup> Shemirat Halashon 1:7

In the Prophets, when G-d condemned the Jewish people, He almost never condemned them about a lack of ritual behavior (except for idol worship), but always complained about their lack of ethical behavior to one another. This included the lack of helping the poor, lack of justice, lying and stealing.<sup>20</sup> When King David asks who can enter the tent of G-d and who can remain and reside on the mountain of G-d, he outlines a plan how to get there and stay there. The next verses outline the major characteristics and traits that a person needs to do this – all acts between man and man: walking uprightly (being honest), doing what is right, speaking only the truth, not doing evil and shameful acts to one's fellow man, not embarrassing others, not swearing falsely, giving people interest-free loans and not accepting any bribes. He who does all of these will never be moved from his place, says King David.<sup>21</sup>

Even though all mitzvot are to be treated with equal importance, in the morning blessings several commandments are enumerated either because they have no upper limit or because their reward is given both in this world and the Next World.<sup>22</sup> Only two of these commandments are on both lists, indicating that these are the "top two" of Jewish commandments. One is Torah learning, and the other is showing kindness towards others. It is interesting to note that of the eight commandments specified as so important that their reward is both in this world and the Next World, six are between man and man, requiring kindness, and only two are Man-to-G-d (i.e., coming early to prayer and Torah learning).

When the Torah commands the Jew to do the right and good thing in all situations (mentioned above), one commentary<sup>23</sup> says this refers specifically to acts of kindness, and these actions will bring goodness to the world and a blessing to the person performing these actions. If we look again carefully at that central verse commanding the Jew to treat all people like he would want to be treated,<sup>24</sup> we see that the verse ends with the words "I am G-d." Why end the most man-to-man verse in the Torah with "I am G-d?" G-d is teaching us that every action between men is also an action between man and G-d. Why and how is this so? Just as a man shows honor to an artist by admiring his painting or respecting his work, by treating a human being with honor, Jews also show respect to the "Artist," the Creator of that human being -- G-d. Thus, every act towards man also brings with it respect for G-d, the Artist, and transforms it into a man-to-G-d act as well. One contemporary thinker compared how Jews treat each other to the treatment between siblings, because G-d is called the Father of the Jewish people (and of all people, for that matter) and Jews are His children.<sup>25</sup> What would any parent prefer experiencing: a child who shows love and devotion to the parent exclusively, or two siblings who show love and devotion to each other? Just as any normal parent would certainly prefer the latter, G-d also prefers for Jews to demonstrate love for each other, even more than love for Him. This idea seems to be echoed by King Solomon when he tells us that G-d prefers justice and Tzedaka (charity) between men over man's sacrifices to G-d, and the Rabbis reiterate this idea as well in the Talmud.<sup>26</sup>

Apparently, how Jews behave towards each other will help them endure until the Messiah arrives. One prophet predicts<sup>27</sup> that the only Jews who will survive the onslaught of Jewish history and endure the test of assimilation and antisemitism will be those Jews who do not hurt their fellow Jews, who do not speak lies and deceive one another, and who feed those who are hungry.

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<sup>20</sup> Amos 2:7, 5:7, Micah 2:2, 6:10-11, Jeremiah 9:4, 7:9, 5:2, 22:13,

<sup>21</sup> Psalm 15

<sup>22</sup> Daily Morning prayer service, morning blessings at the beginning of the service

<sup>23</sup> Haamek Davar commentary on Deuteronomy 6:18

<sup>24</sup> Leviticus 19:18

<sup>25</sup> Malachi 2:10

<sup>26</sup> Proverbs 21:3, Sukkah 49b

<sup>27</sup> Zephaniah 3:13

## **WHY SHOULD JEWS BE GOOD TO ONE ANOTHER?**

The baseball coach Leo Durocher once famously remarked, "Nice guys finish last." That certainly does not seem to be an incentive to be good. Does Judaism believe that being good results in hardships, as Mr. Durocher believed? Aside from the commandments to be good, and the strong emphasis in Judaism for Jews to be full of goodness, are there other practical reasons or benefits to being good on a regular basis and to live one's life in this manner?

Man, if he is normal, seeks to maximize his pleasure in the world. Normally, one thinks of pleasure as the satisfying of one's physical desires. However, the Mishna<sup>28</sup> states that the real pleasures in life are not in this world, but in the Next World. In fact, the words of that Mishna are very explicit: if we were to take all the physical pleasures experienced by every human being in the history of the world and add them up, they would not equal one minute of spiritual pleasure in the Next World. So the goal of every normal person who seeks maximum pleasure (non-Jews can also attain the Next World in Jewish thought) should be to strive to get to the Next World and maximize his or her "portion" of pleasure there in order to receive the most pleasure possible.

But how does a person get to the Next World? The Sages tell us that one cannot get there through the accumulation of money, gold or diamonds. These are worthless in the Next World. The two precious commodities there are the Torah learning and acts of goodness that were attained in this world.<sup>29</sup> Logically, then, to receive maximum pleasure, a person in this world should spend maximum time in these two pursuits. Every mitzvah a person performs in this world is "paid to his or her account" in the Next World.<sup>30</sup> The Midrash<sup>31</sup> even describes the scene that everyone will experience after death when standing at the gates of Heaven. The person will be asked "What did you do in this world?" If he or she says I fed the hungry, that person will be let in straight away. Similarly, if the person says that he or she gave clothing to the needy, that person will be immediately let in. The same holds true for those who helped orphans, gave Tzedaka-charity or performed any acts of goodness on a regular basis. It is interesting that the ritual commandments like Shabbat or kashrut are not mentioned as a prerequisite for entry or for this unique pleasure. Another Midrash implies the same notion when it says<sup>32</sup> that acts of goodness draw a person closer to the presence of G-d, while acts lacking goodness are "ugly" and distance a person from G-d's presence.

Another reason to be good is to achieve another kind of reward. In general, the Torah never states a specific reward for a specific Jewish act or mitzvah. The exception to that rule is found in only three places that promise long life as a reward for doing these actions (either long life in this world on the Next World or both).<sup>33</sup> What are the three actions and what do they have in common? The first is honoring one's parents. The second is sending away the mother bird before taking the eggs, which Maimonides explains trains a person to have mercy on all animals and human beings as well. The third is being honest in business. All three require acts of goodness between men which involve justice, kindness and doing the right thing. Therefore, to attain long life, a person should be a good person who does good acts on a daily basis.

The idea of long life (be it in this world or the Next World) is not only about years. Everyone naturally wants immortality, to continue to live beyond life, even though everyone dies. But by doing good acts, people can attain immortality. How? Rashi explains that the Torah

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<sup>28</sup> Mishna Avot 4:17

<sup>29</sup> Mishna Avot 6:9

<sup>30</sup> Sotah 3b

<sup>31</sup> Midrash Tehilim 118:17

<sup>32</sup> Midrash Tana Debai Eliyahu Rabbah 18

<sup>33</sup> Exodus 20:12, Deuteronomy 22:6-7, 25:15, Maimonides, Guide for the Perplexed 3:48

mentions the death of the evil Terach, Abraham's father, long before he actually died<sup>34</sup> in order to teach us that an evil person who contributes nothing to this world is considered dead even when physically still alive. But Rashi continues and explains that the opposite is also true. If we are good parents, our ideas, ideals and values live on after us through our children. But when the Torah first describes Noah and says, "These are his children," instead of listing his three sons, the Torah then says that Noah was a righteous person. Rashi answers the obvious question and says<sup>35</sup> that for righteous people their acts of goodness are like their children. Why? Like children, the actions of the righteous live on after a person dies. That is why Rashi states that the righteous are called yet alive even after they die. Thus, immortality can indeed be achieved by doing righteous acts that affect people. The impact of these acts continues long after the person dies physically, which helps immortalize a person and continues his or her influence forever. The Chofetz Chaim<sup>36</sup> enhances this concept when he says that one strong act of kindness can impact not only one person, but can continue to have impact from generation to generation until the end of time. Therefore, by being good, a person has the potential to affect for the better thousands or even tens of thousands of individuals and change the world positively forever.

Another advantage of doing something good is that sometimes a person can get credit (in Judaism) for a good act even when he or she had no intention to do goodness. Therefore, if a person lost money in a public place (that there can be no expectation of return to its owner) and a poor person happens to pick it up, the original owner gets credit as if he or she actually gave the money to Tzedaka-charity.<sup>37</sup> There is yet another advantage of being good. The prophet Isaiah promises<sup>38</sup> that if enough people act with justice and Tzedaka-charity, they can together then influence G-d to bring the Redemption. Of course, just the knowledge and good feeling attained after a person has helped someone is sometimes enough to motivate people to do and be good. But all of these other "Jewish" reasons provide added incentive to do acts of goodness on a regular basis.

### **WHEN GOODNESS CONFLICTS WITH OTHER JEWISH ACTIONS, WHICH WINS OUT?**

There are many important values in any system of law, every society and in every religion. Judaism is no different in this respect. It is when these values come into conflict with each other, in any society or system, that we can determine which are indeed the most important. This entire volume deals with extremely important Jewish values that every Jew should highly respect, such as Torah study, fulfilling commandments, etc. What happens when Jews have to choose between being a good person and other positive Jewish values? For example, in Christianity, while being a good person is important, an overall belief in the religion's teachings is far more important and fundamental. Which values are the most important in the hierarchy of Jewish actions and Jewish thought?

Even when in conflict with other important values in Judaism, being good and helping other people seems to "win out." The most profound example of this idea occurs in the Torah. Abraham is ill following his circumcision at age 99, but, despite his weakness, he longs for strangers to visit him so that he can help them because that is his nature. G-d sends three angels disguised as people, while at the same time G-d Himself visits Abraham, teaching the world the importance of visiting the sick. In most religions, this "together time" alone with G-d would be considered the highest ideal possible. Yet, when the strangers arrive, Abraham asks G-d to wait for him, while he (Abraham) takes care of these guests!<sup>39</sup> Abraham felt that helping strangers was

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<sup>34</sup> Rashi commentary on Genesis 11:32

<sup>35</sup> Rash commentary on Genesis 6:9

<sup>36</sup> Shemirat HaLashon 1:7

<sup>37</sup> Midrash Yalkut Shimoni 937

<sup>38</sup> Isaiah 56:1

<sup>39</sup> Genesis 18:3 with Rashi commentary

more important than togetherness with G-d! And Abraham is praised for this act, as he teaches the principle that inviting guests is indeed more important than being with G-d, according to the Midrash.<sup>40</sup> This concept -- that inviting strangers is even more important than a private audience with the Almighty -- is not only a Midrashic suggestion, but is cited as part of normative Jewish law, both in the Sephardic<sup>41</sup> and Ashkenazic<sup>42</sup> traditions.

Another apparent "conflict" between two fundamental issues occurs in the two stories described in the Torah portion of Noach. The first involves the sinning of the people as they committed unspeakable sins between themselves, resulting in the Flood and the destruction of the world. The second, at the end of the Torah reading (Genesis 11:1-9), describes a generation that rebelled against G-d and challenged Him for superiority in the world. Their punishment was the sudden emergence of seventy languages, which confused everyone and stifled the project. Rashi cites both stories and both punishments and asks<sup>43</sup>: it seems that the generation of the Tower of Babel committed the far more egregious sin of challenging G-d (rather than the man-to-man sins culminating in stealing by the generation of the Flood). Why, then, was the generation of the Flood destroyed, while the Babel generation allowed to live? (Both generations did not receive a share in the World to Come.) Rashi answers that even though their sin was far worse, the Babel generation demonstrated unity and caring for each other as they challenged G-d. The generation of the Flood always fought with each other, and there is no hope to build a society once that occurs. While it is true that the Babel generation sinned and was misguided, a society that can unite has the hope of building for the future and correcting its mistakes. This may also explain why Abraham sent his servant Eliezer back to his homeland to find a wife for his son Isaac. Since at that time everyone was not Jewish, what difference did it make if Isaac married a local Canaanite girl or a woman from Mesopotamia? The answer may be that Abraham witnessed the debauchery and deceit of the people of Canaan, in the city of Sodom, and, later, in his dealings with Ephron when he tried to buy a burial plot. In his homeland, on the other hand, despite the idol worship, there were basically good people who dealt properly with each other. He preferred a daughter-in-law from this society to help build the Jewish people over the wicked locals of Canaan who dealt treacherously with each other. In fact, it was the quality of goodness towards strangers that led Eliezer to select Rebecca to be Isaac's wife.

Another area of discord involves the conflict when a ritual commandment comes into conflict with a command to be good, specifically to oneself -- i.e., to preserve one's own dignity. If preserving dignity would violate a Torah or Rabbinic commandment, which takes precedence? Once again, the Talmud and Jewish law<sup>44</sup> state that it is preferable to violate a commandment as long as one's dignity is preserved. The classic case involves a Kohen-Priest who is commanded not to be in a house where a dead body lies in order not to become ritually impure. Such a person must leave the house immediately if a corpse is inside. But what should he Kohen (Priest) do if he is sleeping without clothing and then wakes up to discover the body? Technically, he must leave the house immediately once he becomes aware of the dead body, even without his clothing. However, Jewish law says that he may violate this Jewish law of remaining with the dead body in order to preserve his dignity, and he may dress before leaving the house.

There is another instance, described by the prophet,<sup>45</sup> when a man wishes to act piously and adopts a fast to demonstrate that piety. If, however, he ignores the needs of the poor, G-d says that he prefers that the person not fast but instead he should feed the hungry and give

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<sup>40</sup> Midrash, Yalkut Shimoni 18:82

<sup>41</sup> Kaf HaChaim 5:6

<sup>42</sup> Rema, Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 33:1, with Mishne Berurah commentary 8

<sup>43</sup> Rashi commentary on Genesis 11:9

<sup>44</sup> Berachot 19b, Maimonides, Hilchot Shabbat 26:23, Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 372:1

<sup>45</sup> Isaiah 58:5-7

clothing to whoever needs clothes. Similarly, G-d tells the person who thinks he can "fix" bad ethical behavior with ritual acts and prayer that he is mistaken.<sup>46</sup> Based on the verse in Hosea where G-d states that He desires kindness and not sacrifices, the Midrash<sup>47</sup> says that G-d would rather see people helping other people than receive all the sacrifices that were brought to the First Temple by King Solomon.

A *Tzadik*—righteous person is a Jew who is careful in every detail of observance of the commandments. But when the prophet calls someone a “good *Tzadik*,” the Talmud<sup>48</sup> asks if there can be someone who is a bad *Tzadik* and another who is a good *Tzadik*. It answers that someone who is especially careful in those commandments between man and G-d is indeed righteous, but a person who is especially vigilant in the details of the man-to-man commandments as well is called a good *Tzadik*. Thus, we see again and again the higher priority for goodness in Judaism, even when in conflict with other values and commandments.

### **IF GOODNESS IS SO IMPORTANT, HOW CAN "OBSERVANT" JEWS EVER NOT BE GOOD?**

After establishing the principle of goodness as the highest priority in Judaism, how is it possible for anyone who wants to observe G-d's commandments not to be a good person all the time, every day? And how can it be that basically good people sometimes act in a way that hurts others?

In order to maintain man's free will, G-d intentionally implanted in all human beings both the good inclination and the inclination to do evil. But both tendencies are not equal within each person. Left unchecked, the Torah seems to say that the evil inclination will win out every time.<sup>49</sup> However, shouldn't a person born with good tendencies be able to overcome his evil side and do kind acts? The Talmud<sup>50</sup> answers by saying that G-d made sure that the opposite is true: the more righteous a person is, the greater is his or her evil inclination. Therefore, it is even more difficult for naturally good people to actually do good. The Talmud continues and says that each day, the propensity for evil wins out most of the time. Therefore, it is quite understandable that even though people know what the right thing to do is, actually doing it while battling the evil inclination is quite difficult. G-d does promise<sup>51</sup>, however, that while man necessarily sins in this world, in the World to Come G-d will remove the evil inclination, and then man will only do what is right.

### **NOT DOING EVIL DOES NOT MAKE AN INDIVIDUAL INTO A GOOD PERSON**

In survey after survey where individuals are asked if they are "a good person" more than 95% of the respondents respond that they think of themselves as basically good. Even though they may regularly lie and not help others in need, they still believe they are good. How is that possible? This phenomenon occurs because most people tend to believe that as long as they do not do anything truly evil and do not commit a major crime, they are good. Does that concur with the Jewish definition of goodness?

King David outlines the formula for Jewish goodness,<sup>52</sup> saying that it is a two-step process. First a person has to reject and desist from doing all evil actions, but that is not enough. After rejecting evil, the person must actively do moral acts and help others. Only then is that individual

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<sup>46</sup> Isaiah 1:15

<sup>47</sup> Hosea 6:6, Midrash Yalkut Shimoni 522

<sup>48</sup> Isaiah 3:10, Kiddushin 40a

<sup>49</sup> Genesis 6:5, 8:21

<sup>50</sup> Sukkah 52a

<sup>51</sup> Midrash Tanchuma, Vayikra 6

<sup>52</sup> Psalms 34:13, 15



considered to be a good person. This is also reflected in the Mishna<sup>53</sup> which says that if the person does nothing to help or hurt others ("what is mine is mine, what is yours is yours"), at most he is considered a mediocre person, but certainly not a good person. Another opinion equates this person with the evil values of Sodom. Thus, doing no evil is certainly not enough to be considered good in Judaism.

In actuality, doing nothing is more than just being "neutral" in Jewish thought. In the twentieth century, Edmund Burke stated that, "All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that a few good men do nothing." But long before Burke, the Torah and Jewish law considered it a sin to do nothing when anyone in need can be helped.<sup>54</sup> In fact, Judaism is the only legal system in the world where a person can be punished and it is considered a crime if he or she does nothing! Thus, from the Jewish perspective, not being a bad person does not render an individual a good human being.

### **UNIQUELY JEWISH TRAITS OF GOODNESS**

Until now, we have generally defined goodness as "helping others in need." However, we have already seen several Scriptural terms describing goodness, and not all are exactly the same. For example, in the verse described above commanding each Jew to do justice and kindness, one commentary<sup>55</sup> defines *Mishpat* -- justice as "not doing to someone what you would not want to have done to you," and *Chesed* -- kindness as "doing your utmost to help out anyone in need in every situation." What are the specific traits that define Jewish goodness?

The Talmud makes a statement which seems very provocative by 21<sup>st</sup> century standards. It says<sup>56</sup> that any person who is merciful must be a Jew from the seed of Abraham. This sounds racist. Does the statement imply that there are no non-Jews in the world who are merciful, or that every Jew in the world is merciful? Of course this is not the case. Then what does it signify?

As seen above through all the sources, goodness in all its forms is an extremely important value to G-d. When G-d saw that Abraham possessed this and other values that he would pass down to his children, G-d selected Abraham to begin the Jewish nation. This teaching inculcated the values of goodness into the Jewish people so much that it became part of their spiritual DNA. Do other people have this trait? Of course they do. But every Jew has the potential for mercy and goodness. The Jew is predisposed and expected to act in this manner. Perhaps this explains why Jews tend to be involved, way out of proportion to their numbers, in so many causes in helping make the world a better place or in giving a much higher percentage of Tzedaka-charity than other groups. Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzato says<sup>57</sup> that the tendencies of each nation were established very early in history and became part of each nation's culture. This seems to also explain why Maimonides states that giving Tzedaka is part of the traditions established by Abraham and passed down to his children.<sup>58</sup> Sefat Emet also makes the point that there is something unique that Abraham passed down which is spiritually inside every Jew.<sup>59</sup>

There is another reason that Jews have developed a special sensitivity to be good. Since they suffered in Egypt, that experience acted like a spiritual refinery, says G-d, as explained by Rashi.<sup>60</sup> As Jews suffered so much for so long due to the evil of their oppressors, they developed a

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<sup>53</sup> Mishna Avot 5:10

<sup>54</sup> Leviticus 19:16, Shulchan Aruch, Choshen Mishpat 426:1

<sup>55</sup> Micah 6:8 with Ibn Ezra commentary

<sup>56</sup> Beitza 32b

<sup>57</sup> Derech Hashem 2:4

<sup>58</sup> Maimonides, Hilchot Matnot Aniyim 10:1, Genesis 18:19

<sup>59</sup> Sefat Emet, Lech Lecha 5635

<sup>60</sup> Deuteronomy 4:20 with Rashi commentary

loathing to do evil to others, and they especially help underdogs who suffer as they did. This idea is also reflected in the words of Isaiah<sup>61</sup> when he describes that this process is also part of the reason G-d chose the Jewish people to be His nation. If that is true, are there other traits (that lead to goodness) that Jews have spiritually ingrained within them, in addition to those described above?

Jews have more of a sense of shame than other people, according to the Talmud.<sup>62</sup> Another passage<sup>63</sup> says that Jews have three distinctive values or traits: mercy, bashfulness and kindness. (This does not mean that anyone who has these traits is Jewish, as many non-Jews possess all three traits. But Jews are spiritually pre-disposed to them.) Jeremiah cites three terms<sup>64</sup> which G-d demonstrates and Jews are supposed to imitate: *Chesed*-kindness, *Mishpat*-justice and *Tzedaka*-charity. Interestingly, one decisor of Jewish law<sup>65</sup> explains the reason that a blessing is not recited on commandments involving goodness and man-to-man actions. He clarifies that since the actions of goodness that both Jews and non-Jews do are identical, even though the Jews may be doing them because of G-d's command (as stated in the text of blessings on commandments), no blessing is recited. An onlooker would not be able to know that the motivation for the Jew's action was purely due to the mitzvah-commandment.

Just as there are different traits that comprise Jewish goodness, there are different types of Jewish personalities that describe good Jews. One type is the *Tzadik*—righteous person and the other is the *Chasid*-kind person (not to be confused with the *Chassidim* of today, a movement that was founded in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, thousands of years after the Torah was given). Both are full of goodness. Since Jews are commanded to imitate G-d and His ways, G-d is described as both a *Tzadik* and a *Chasid*.<sup>66</sup> The goal of every Jew is to be both a *Tzadik* and a *Chasid*, says the Midrash.<sup>67</sup> What exactly is the difference between a *Tzadik* and a *Chasid*, between *Tzedaka*-charity and *Chesed*-kindness?

Maimonides<sup>68</sup> explains that *Chesed* is something that is performed for 1) a person who has no claims upon us, or 2) to someone who is deserving, but we give beyond their needs. Thus, a *Chasid* is someone who goes way beyond the letter of the law in every way, whether helping others or in his own piety. *Tzedek* is justice, which implies exactitude to uphold the law and do everything that is right and correct. Thus a *Tzadik* follows the law to the letter and helps everyone equally, based on what is required by Jewish law. The Midrash<sup>69</sup> implies that everyone should aspire to become a *Tzadik*, and everyone has the potential to attain this status, regardless of his background. The Mishna<sup>70</sup> shows many examples of a person called a *Chasid*, who demonstrate outstanding character traits that go beyond the expected norm in goodness and helping others. The Talmud<sup>71</sup> gives an example of a person who legally took out Shabbat goods from a burning house where the owner had renounced ownership, yet after Shabbat this person returned the items to the owner. He is called a *Chasid*. Ulla was castigated in one instance because he merely did what Jewish law required of him (see chapter about “Going Beyond the Letter of the Law” for a full discussion of this issue). Since he was known to be a *Chasid*, he was expected to go beyond

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<sup>61</sup> Isaiah 48:10

<sup>62</sup> Nedarim 20a

<sup>63</sup> Yevamot 79a

<sup>64</sup> Jeremiah 9:22-23

<sup>65</sup> Aruch HaShulchan Choshen Mishpat 427:10

<sup>66</sup> Psalms 145:17, Jeremiah 3:12

<sup>67</sup> Midrash Sifri Eikev 49

<sup>68</sup> Maimonides, Guide for the Perplexed 1:53

<sup>69</sup> Midrash Tehilim 146

<sup>70</sup> Mishna Avot 5:10, 11, 13

<sup>71</sup> Shabbat 120a

what the law required and do even more.<sup>72</sup> Maimonides reinforces this idea in defining a *Chasid*.<sup>73</sup> Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan rules<sup>74</sup> that although both are great men, when "push comes to shove," a *Chasid* is regarded as greater than a *Tzadik*. Why? In the end, it is the *Chasid* who helps others more than the *Tzadik*. And since that is the most important aspect of Judaism, the *Chasid* is considered the greater Jew.

Although these two different personalities, *Tzadik* and *Chasid*, epitomize the Jewish values of justice and kindness or love, in the end, as we saw in the verse above (Micah 6:8) and in the Midrash, G-d wishes for each Jew to do both "justice" and "love of kindness," – in other words, to combine both these values, because both are necessary in order to achieve goodness in relating to one's fellow man. This is because kindness (or love) alone, without justice, eventually leads to rivalry, which may even lead to hatred. And justice alone without kindness-love is devoid of the humanizing forces of compassion and mercy. Thus, to achieve true goodness and G-d's ethical ideal of a Jew's role in this world, Jews need to strive to attain both of these qualities.

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*Rabbi Dr. Nachum Amsel currently works with Rabbi Berel Wein and the Destiny Foundation as the Director of Education, whose mission is "to bring Jewish history to life in an exciting, entertaining and interactive way." Rabbi Amsel has also served as a teacher, a school principal, and an adjunct professor. He has also taught over 2000 educators how to teach more effectively. Rabbi Amsel has worked in all areas of formal and informal Jewish education and has developed numerous curricula including a methodology how to teach Jewish Values using mass media. Recently, he founded the STARS Program (Student Torah Alliance for Russian Speakers), where more than 3000 students in 12 Russian speaking countries learn about their Jewish heritage for five hours weekly. Rabbi Amsel previously served as the Educational Director of Hillel in the Former Soviet Union. He lives in Jerusalem with his wife and has four children and four grandchildren.*

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<sup>72</sup> Jerusalem Talmud, Terumot 47a

<sup>73</sup> Maimonides, Commentary to the Mishna Avot 5:7, 6:1

<sup>74</sup> Shemirat Halashon 1:7