

## **PURPOSE OF LIFE**

by Rabbi Dr. Nachum Amsel

*This essay is from the forthcoming book, "The Encyclopedia of Jewish Values: Man to G-d Issues and Rituals." This essay is not intended as a source of practical halachic (legal) rulings. For matters of halachah, please consult a qualified posek (rabbi).*

It is, of course, THE ultimate question: what is our purpose in life? Everyone naturally wishes to find the answer to this question, to make his or her life as meaningful as possible. The purpose of one's life is a concept that may be understood on many different levels, from the deeply philosophical and abstract, to the very practical, which can guide one's daily activity. This question is very difficult to answer from a Jewish perspective as well, since life can be looked at Jewishly from many different viewpoints, and there is a myriad of sources, each conveying different outlooks. Therefore, we will try to analyze the purpose of life in Judaism from various Jewish perspectives, all based on normative sources, and each reader can incorporate which of the ideas are most meaningful personally.

## **PLEASURE**

People who do not believe in G-d will often say that their purpose in life is to have as much pleasure as possible, and this goal guides all their activities. For these individuals, life means "having fun." However, what is "fun?" Defining pleasure is difficult in and of itself. Some will claim that different types of pleasures other than physical are more satisfying, such as helping others and watching children develop. In Judaism, one may also claim that the purpose of life is to achieve pleasure. But there is an ultimate Jewish pleasure that is greater than all other pleasures. The Mishna<sup>1</sup> states that the non-physical pleasure that a person will experience in one minute of the World to Come will be greater than all the lifetime of pleasures that he or she experienced in this world (and even greater than the sum of all the pleasures that all human beings in history ever experienced in total!). Therefore, if trying to experience this highest pleasure is the purpose of the Jew, then entering the World to Come should be the goal.

How does one enter the World to Come (see Chapter "[Life After Life](#)" for greater detail)? The Talmud<sup>2</sup> says that for each mitzvah-commandment that a person performs in this world, that mitzvah is sent on ahead of him or her to the World to Come. Thus, it stands to reason that by doing all 613 mitzvot (or as many commandments as possible by one individual), it appears that one can maximize his or her share in the World to Come. But this goal seems too general and too difficult for most people to achieve – keep all of G-d's commandments. Can one indeed enter the World to Come with all its pleasures by performing less than all 613 Mitzvot? Of course. The Talmud<sup>3</sup> says that a person can sometimes acquire (or lose) his or her World to Come even in one single act. However, man is not privileged to be informed which acts are key to this great reward. But are there specific types of commandments that will maximize a Jew's reward? The Midrash<sup>4</sup> informs us that to get into the Gates of Heaven, we should perform those acts of kindness that benefit the needy, and it lists feeding the hungry, clothing those in need, helping orphans and other general acts of kindness. The Talmud<sup>5</sup> tells us that three specific mitzvot guarantee a person the World to Come: living in the Land of Israel, teaching and raising one's children with Torah and making the *Havdalah*-Separation prayer at Shabbat's conclusion with the same wine one used for Kiddush beginning the Shabbat

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<sup>1</sup> Avot 4:17

<sup>2</sup> Sotah 3b

<sup>3</sup> Avodah Zarah 18a

<sup>4</sup> Midrash, Tehilim 118:17

<sup>5</sup> Pesachim 113a

on Friday night (there are many explanations of the symbolic meaning of this last act). The Talmud<sup>6</sup> records that there are some mitzvot which are so great that their reward is given both in this world and in the Next World. Perhaps these are the "most important" commandments that lead to the greatest pleasure. Among these are: honoring one's mother and father, general acts of kindness, arriving early for Torah study, providing hospitality to needy guests, visiting the sick, providing funds for a poor bride to allow her to marry, escorting the dead at a funeral, delving into, and understanding prayer, bringing peace between two people, and learning Torah is equivalent to them all. The Mishna<sup>7</sup> further states that Torah learning achieves life both in this world and in the World to Come.

### **BEING ALL THAT YOU CAN BE**

While certainly acknowledging the importance of keeping the commandments, Maimonides,<sup>8</sup> in his book *Guide for the Perplexed*, discusses a totally different approach to each human being's purpose in the world. For the animal kingdom, the goal is that each species produces the best possible animal that species is capable of, in total (with its unique characteristics). In contrast, when it comes to man, each person must find those qualities and characteristics which make him or her unique, and then attempt to maximize potential by fully developing those qualities, both intellectually and in one's values and behavior. While it may be difficult at first for each person to discover which are the qualities he or she possesses that are unique to him or her, once discovered, these must be used and developed until that person has reached his or her potential.

Regarding those qualities that make each person special and unique, Rabbi Shraga Feivel Mendlowitz used to point to a phrase that is mentioned in the Musaf service of Rosh Hashana: "*Maase ish ufekudato*"<sup>9</sup> which is translated as "Man's actions and his mission." Each person, then, has a specific mission in this world that it is unique to him or her. Once discovered, each person must try to maximize and fulfill that mission. The word *pekuda* in modern Hebrew is an order given in a military context. Just as each combatant has his or her unique function, and only if each soldier plays his or her role perfectly, will the army, as a whole, accomplish its overall task. So, too, G-d has given each human being a role in this world to fulfill, and only when everyone works together to fulfill that role, will the human race's potential be maximized. Although it may not be easy to discover one's uniqueness and mission, if each person truly attempts to find his or calling in life, it will somehow be shown to him or her. Thus, the word *pekuda* is also similar to the Hebrew word *tafkid*, which signifies one's mission in life.

Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook also writes about this idea in a different context. At the end of the Silent Prayer on Yom Kippur, Jews recite an unusual phrase: "G-d, before I was created, I was unworthy, and now that I have been created, it is as if I had not been created."<sup>10</sup> What do these strange words signify? Rabbi Kook explains that before a person was created, it was not his or her time to be created in history (if it had been the right time earlier, then he or she would have then been created earlier). Why? The time was not right for this person's particular mission. For example, a person who is great machinist today would have wasted this skill and mission if he had been created a thousand years ago, before machines existed. But now that this person has been created, the prayer continues, if he or she is not fulfilling his or her specific mission to the maximum, it is as if he or she was not created at all, since one's purpose is not being

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<sup>6</sup> Shabbat 127a

<sup>7</sup> Avot 6:7

<sup>8</sup> Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed* III, 27

<sup>9</sup> Musaf Prayer on Rosh Hashana, Zichronot section

<sup>10</sup> End of Amidah on Yom Kippur

maximized.<sup>11</sup> Jews then pray to G-d to help Him show them their mission and help them maximize it. And if they look for the signs, G-d shows each person what is his or her unique mission in life.

This same concept was written by Rabbi Yehuda Aryeh Leib Alter (*Sefat Emet*), who quotes his grandfather Rabbi Yitzchak Meir Alter (*Chidushei Harim*). He says that when the Mishna states, "If I am not for myself, who will be for me?"<sup>12</sup> the deeper message is that each person was born to change and enrich the world in a specific manner, unique to that person, that no one else in that generation is capable of doing.<sup>13</sup> So, too, Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, who lived one hundred years after Sefat Emet, wrote that just as Moses had a particular *shlichut*-mission in life given directly by G-d,<sup>14</sup> so, too, each person was born at a specific time, in a specific place, with a particular mission unique to him or her. G-d knows all of each person's potential, as well as shortcomings, and enables him or her to complete the mission for which he or she was created.<sup>15</sup>

### **IMMORTALITY**

Some people believe that a person's goal is to stay alive as long as possible and, if possible, to reach immortality. While this has been an elusive goal for man from time immemorial, no one, so far, has been able to escape inevitable death in a physical sense. Some have believed that if they can leave their names on a building, i.e., have it called by their names, they will achieve immortality. This was the goal, according to some commentators, of the generation who built a tower in order to challenge G-d.<sup>16</sup> They believed that if they could build this building, they "would make a name for themselves,"<sup>17</sup> achieving immortality. G-d not only foiled their plot by destroying the tower and dispersing the people, but He made sure that the immortality they sought, and their memories would never be achieved. Not one name of any of those individuals is recorded in the Torah. But, on the other hand, Judaism does tell us how to indeed achieve immortality in the spiritual sense.

One way to achieve Jewish immortality is through our children. Thou people cannot live forever; they can continue to live on if their children embrace the lifestyle and values they stood for. Another way in which human beings can stay alive is through their actions. Rashi<sup>18</sup> echoes a Jewish concept when he says that the righteous stay alive even after they die, since their actions not only continue their memories, but also continue to help change the world for the better, even when they are no longer alive. Imagine the person who constantly helped others both physically and spiritually. Every act helping another individual has a ripple effect that can continue forever. All the people he or she has helped, for example, will, in turn, now be able to continue to help others of the same generation and even of future generations. Rashi<sup>19</sup> alludes to this same idea when he says that the good deeds of the righteous are equivalent to children, i.e., they both continue a person's life after they are physically gone from this world. The Talmud<sup>20</sup> uses the same principle to note an additional way to achieve immortality: by teaching Torah to one's children. The

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<sup>11</sup> Olay Re-iyah commentary (of Rabbi Kook) to Yom Kippur service

<sup>12</sup> Mishna Avot 1:14

<sup>13</sup> Sefat Emet. Parshat Korach, 5647

<sup>14</sup> Exodus 3:10

<sup>15</sup> Yimei Zikaron, Harav Yosef Dov HaLevi Soloveitchik, page 11

<sup>16</sup> Genesis 11:1-9

<sup>17</sup> Genesis 11:4

<sup>18</sup> Rashi commentary on Genesis 11:32

<sup>19</sup> Rashi commentary on Genesis 6:9

<sup>20</sup> Kiddushin 30a

Talmud says that this learning will be passed on to their children and their children's children, etc. until the end of time. Thus, the original teacher will remain alive spiritually through the Torah taught, and his or her effect will be felt, like the righteous person's good deeds, when this Torah teaching will help shape the thoughts and actions of future descendants.

### **BASIC PRINCIPLES OF JUDAISM**

In trying to reduce Judaism to its essence or *raison d'etre*, the Talmud<sup>21</sup> begins with the 613 commandments, but then King David came along and reduced the 613 individual commandments to eleven basic principles. Isaiah further reduced these to six basic principles of Judaism. Micah later came and reduced Judaism to three principles based on the verse in his book.<sup>22</sup> In this verse, G-d requires but three things of man: to do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with G-d. The passage continues and discusses the implication of each principle. Then the Talmud states that Isaiah further reduced Judaism to two principles of justice and righteousness. Finally, Habakkuk summarized Judaism into one essential principle;<sup>23</sup> the just person should live by his faith. While space does not permit a full expansion of this concept, the essence of Judaism, at least according to this Talmudic passage, is one's faith as a guiding principle.

It should be clear to the reader by now that none of these sets of principles are necessary in conflict with each other, as all the opinions agree what Judaism and a Jewish life should be but may not agree on the emphasis or ways of formulating Judaism's essence. Similarly, all the concepts that were noted above, and those which will be discussed below, are not in conflict either. One may certainly understand that all of these ideas working together harmoniously, and are all legitimate ideas within Judaism, considered valid words of G-d.<sup>24</sup>

### **TO HONOR G-D**

The Mishna<sup>25</sup> states that when G-d created the world, the entire purpose was for His honor, i.e., man should live in a manner that honors G-d. While we cannot truly comprehend why G-d would want us to honor Him (perhaps by honoring G-d we can understand ourselves better and realize how much we need G-d), it is our goal as Jews to honor Him. How does one accomplish this?

The Talmud<sup>26</sup> gives Jews a direction to an answer to this question, by explaining another difficult passage. G-d asks the Jewish people to "walk after the ways of G-d."<sup>27</sup> What is the implication of this verse – how can a human being possibly walk as G-d does, especially since G-d is a non-physical being who does not physically walk? The Talmud answers that Jews are to imitate G-d's ways as demonstrated in how G-d relates to man. Just as G-d clothed the naked Adam,<sup>28</sup> so, too, Jews must give clothes to those in need. Just as G-d visited the sick, Abraham,<sup>29</sup> so, too, Jews should visit the sick. Similarly, as G-d comforted the

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<sup>21</sup> Makkot 24a

<sup>22</sup> Micah 6:8

<sup>23</sup> Habakkuk 2:4

<sup>24</sup> Eruvin 14b

<sup>25</sup> Avot 6:11

<sup>26</sup> Sotah 14a

<sup>27</sup> Deuteronomy 13:5

<sup>28</sup> Genesis 3:21

<sup>29</sup> Genesis 18:1

mourner<sup>30</sup> and buried the dead,<sup>31</sup> so should Jews. The Midrash<sup>32</sup> echoes a similar idea, exhorting the Jew to imitate G-d by giving gifts, being righteous, pious, and holy. Maimonides codifies this.<sup>33</sup> Another way in which Jews can honor G-d, is by honoring those things which G-d created, i.e., man, animal, and the entire earth. Any artist is certainly honored when his or her creation is treated well, and spoken about with respect. So, too, man honors the Almighty by treating His creations, everything on earth, with great respect (see the chapter on [Human Dignity](#) for an amplification of this concept).

### **SANCTIFYING G-D'S NAME**

There is an additional way man can honor G-d. When others think better of G-d because of the actions that Jews do, G-d is honored and sanctified. This is known in Jewish terms as *Kiddush Hashem*, sanctifying G-d's name, and it is an important mitzvah-commandment. Based on the Torah verse commanding Jews that G-d should become holy through the Jewish people,<sup>34</sup> Maimonides<sup>35</sup> defines how a Jew's actions can either sanctify G-d's name or desecrate G-d's name. The Midrash<sup>36</sup> states that entire purpose of giving of the Torah was to sanctify G-d's name. The Talmud<sup>37</sup> explains that the commandment to love G-d<sup>38</sup> actually means to cause others to love G-d (or think greater of Him) because of things that a person does. The Talmud<sup>39</sup> demonstrates the importance of this mitzvah with a story of a Jew named Ben Gurion, who went to extraordinary lengths so that the name of G-d should not be desecrated. Ethics of the Fathers<sup>40</sup> considers desecrating G-d's name such a heinous sin, that regarding this particular action, there can be no concept of unintentional desecration, which exists involving the observance of every other commandment, since if G-d's name is desecrated, it makes no difference what the intention was – the evil deed has been done. This mitzvah is so crucial that the avoidance of desecrating G-d's name must be accomplished at any cost, so that even if a righteous person feels that he or she is about to sin and is losing control (which will desecrate G-d's name), he or she should go to a strange town and do the sin incognito in order to avoid besmirching G-d's name.<sup>41</sup> In this way, only a stranger will appear to have done an indecent act, and not a righteous man, which would bring more shame on Judaism and G-d.

### **ARGUMENT ABOUT EMPHASIS**

There seems to be an argument, mentioned in two different Midrashim,<sup>42</sup> about which type of mitzvah is the true essence of Judaism. Rabbi Akiva says that the essence of the Torah is to love one's neighbor as oneself,<sup>43</sup> while Ben Azai says that the essence of the Torah is that man was made in G-d's image.<sup>44</sup> What is their argument? According to Rabbi Akiva, it seems that the essence of man's activity is centered on the man-to-man relationship, and this should be the driving force in a Jew's life, while Ben Azai seems to emphasize the man to G-d aspect of the human being, stressing that this must be the philosophical

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<sup>30</sup> Genesis 25:11

<sup>31</sup> Deuteronomy 34:6

<sup>32</sup> Midrash, Sifri, Eikev 13

<sup>33</sup> Maimonides, Hilchot Deot 1:6

<sup>34</sup> Leviticus 22:32

<sup>35</sup> Maimonides, Hilchot Yesodai HaTorah 5:1-3

<sup>36</sup> Midrash, Tana DeBei Eliyahu Rabbah 26:2

<sup>37</sup> Yoma 86a

<sup>38</sup> Deuteronomy 6:5

<sup>39</sup> Taanit 19b

<sup>40</sup> Avot 4:4

<sup>41</sup> Moed Katan 17a

<sup>42</sup> Beraishit Rabbah 24:7 and Midrash, Sifra, Kiddushin 4

<sup>43</sup> Leviticus 19:18

<sup>44</sup> Genesis 5:1

basis for man's actions. Although these great men were arguing, we may adopt the two concepts concurrently, as both principles may be the foundations by which a Jew lives. Especially since man is a creation of G-d, and G-d is honored each time man honor one of His creations, all actions between man and man already contain an aspect of man to G-d. Therefore, both of these principles can remain a focus, a goal, and help explain man's purpose in the world: to honor G-d and to honor one's fellow man at the same time.

### **WHAT DOES IT ALL MEAN?**

Based on all the sources, it seems a bit confusing to determine the real purpose of a human being on this earth. There are so many different and somewhat conflicting ideas about which values, and actions are truly most important. What is the proper path in which a Jew should travel? What are the priorities by which a Jew can maximize himself and fulfill the word of G-d?

Perhaps, a sentence from the High Holiday prayers will clear up the possible confusion. It says<sup>45</sup> that three separate components are necessary to overcome an evil decree: repentance, prayer and Tzedaka (Jewish charity). The use of the connective Hebrew letter *vav*, "*and*" shows us that all three are necessary, and not any one quality alone. What does this mean? These are not merely three mechanical actions of the Jew needed to overcome the evil decree, but three separate aspects of life, the three relationships that each person has on a daily basis. Teshuva, repentance, represents the relationship that man has with himself. Tefilah, prayer, represents the relationship that man has with G-d, and Tzedaka, Jewish charity, is the relationship that man has with his fellow man. What this sentence is saying, then, is that all three relationships, all three aspects of life are equally important to the Jew, to accomplish his ultimate goal and purpose.

While most other religions stress as its essence one of these three relationships, only Judaism stresses that all three are equally crucial. Thus, the Golden Rule of Christianity is to turn the other cheek (man to man), the essence of Islam is prayer (man to G-d) and many of the eastern religions stress introspection (man to himself), Judaism believes that all three are necessary and crucial. This can be seen in a Mishna<sup>46</sup> that parallels this statement, and states that the world stands upon three pillars: Torah, Divine Service, and kindness. These three pillars stand for the same three relationships of man: Torah represents the relationship of man to himself, Divine Service represents the relationship of man to G-d, and Kindness represents the relationship of man to man. Just as the world would not continue to exist if one of these pillars were missing, so, too, Judaism, within each person, cannot exist in its fullest sense, unless a person devotes himself or herself to all three aspects of life. Therefore, a Jew cannot fulfill his or her purpose in life if he prays three times daily in the synagogue but does not help his fellow man. Similarly, the Jew who is a great benefactor, giving great sums to Tzedaka and volunteering, but does not worship or learn Torah is also not fulfilling his or her total purpose as a Jew. All three are needed.

It has been asked which of the three aspects or relationships are most important in Judaism. In many of the High Holiday prayer books, above this "magic formula" canceling the evil decree are printed, in small type, three other words, which have their origins in the Kabbalah. Above the word "Repentance" is the Hebrew word *Tzom*, which signifies a fast. Above "Prayer" is the Hebrew word *Kol*, which signifies voice, and above the word "Tzedaka" is found the Hebrew word *Mamon*, which signifies money. Without discussing all the Kabbalistic meanings, one thing is clear. The numeric value in Hebrew of each of these three words is exactly 136. This tells us, in symbolic form, that all three concepts, all three relationships, are

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<sup>45</sup> The last line of the *Unetaneh Tokef* prayer, recited in Musaf right before the *Kedusha* prayer

<sup>46</sup> Avot 1:2

of equal importance in Judaism. While the order in which one achieves the Jewish goal in life may or may not be significant in the order of the prayer or the order of the Mishna, the Jew needs all three equally.

As if to strengthen this idea, one can further use numerology in proving this point. The verse says<sup>47</sup> that the embodiment of perfection in Judaism, the High Priest could only come to the Holy of Holies with "this," in Hebrew, *Zot*. The value of *Zot* is 408, the sum of 136 three times. Thus, the High Priest needed all three of these components in order to come before G-d and plead for the Jewish people to be forgiven on Yom Kippur. Two of the three components would not suffice, only all three together. In another verse,<sup>48</sup> the simple meaning of the words are "a brutish man does not know (G-d), and a fool does not understand this." However, with the word "this" or *Zot* appearing as well, we may understand the verse to be teaching us that a fool does not understand the deeper meaning of the 408, *Zot*, all three components of Judaism. But the first part of the verse also relates the same idea. the Hebrew for "brutish man" is *Baar*, whose numerical value is 272, or twice 136. Thus, we can say that a man who has only two components of the three (272), also will not know G-d in the fullest sense.

Whether one accepts or does not accept this concept of numerology in Judaism, the idea of all three relationships is necessary to the Jew and should be acted upon. A Jew cannot maximize himself or herself and hope to achieve true purpose in the world until all the three relationships are properly cultivated in a Jewish sense.

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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>47</sup> Leviticus 16:3

<sup>48</sup> Psalms 92:7