

The Righteous Path: YK 5779 (2018)

A draft written for speaking purposes by Rabbi Michael Schwab

A new pew survey released this year lists the top ten reasons why Americans who attend religious services on a monthly basis show up. You can probably guess a number of them: number 10, “to please a spouse”; number 6, “to be a part of a community”; and number 4, “to find comfort”. And while the number 1 reason listed is, perhaps predictably, “to become closer to God”, I wonder, can you guess what numbers two and three are? Number 2: To “become a better person” and number 3: “to ensure their children will have a strong moral foundation”. In other words, **two of the top three** reasons given, highlight the congregation’s role in helping its membership become better, or more moral people. According to this survey it is of supreme importance to these Americans to live a life of morality and they feel that their time: learning the ethical values of their religion, articulated in prayer and study, as well as participating as part of the community in fulfilling those values through, programs, events or actions *produced* by the congregation, provides a structure in which they feel they *can*

become the moral and decent people they so very much want to be. In other words, these Americans want to lead moral lives and they believe that their religious institutions can help them.

I couldn't agree more. Let's be honest, living a moral life is difficult. How do you even decide in certain cases, what is right and what is wrong? We confront such decisions all the time and are left with the anxiety of constantly figuring out what to do. A psychologist I saw giving a TED talk, indicated that one of the most challenging things in life is making hard choices. She made the reasonable claim that choices are hardest when it is *not* clear to us which one is best, even if it is about something small, like which TV to buy. And these days we have so many choices about everything, which is perhaps why our anxiety is so elevated! But she further pointed out, and I think we can all agree, that choices are especially vexing, when there is an *ethical* dimension to them, when we must choose between right and wrong, or sometimes what is even harder, between "more right" and "more wrong". For the consequences of our decisions are far-reaching when morality is

involved, and much more important. If we choose the wrong TV, that may be frustrating. But if we wrong another *human being*, the consequences for the victim and the potential guilt *we* could feel might even last a life time.

As Judaism teaches, each of us *is* essentially good and therefore at our core I think we *all* want to live a life of righteousness. Therefore making good ethical choices will impact directly on our assessment of a life well-lived. And these choices are all around us every day: from family ethics to business ethics; from community ethics to medical ethics: do we succeed at work at the expense of time with family? Do we skirt a law we find objectionable to increase profits so we can support those we love better? Do we take the time from our legitimately busy day to help someone whose bag fell open on the sidewalk? Do we decide that it is time for hospice for a loved one instead of trying another procedure? And the list goes on and on.

The fundamental importance of how we handle such tough ethical choices is, I believe, why we read about the excruciating, difficult and emotional Biblical story of the banishment of Hagar during the High

Holidays. You may recall that Sarah finally had her *own* son with Abraham after being barren for most of her life and watching her handmaiden Hagar serve as a surrogate for her husband and give birth to Ishmael. Her infertility had been painful and Sarah had long been envious of Hagar's ability to carry a child for Abraham. With the birth of her *own* son she now wanted primacy for Isaac and became jealous of her husband's divided attention between the two boys. "*Expel* the slave-woman and her son," she instructed Abraham. Abraham, of course, hesitated and the Torah tells us that he is torn. Should he honor his beloved wife's wishes who had suffered *so* much and send his own son and their long-dedicated servant away? Or *defy* her wishes and spare his son and Hagar who seem to have done no wrong? He consults with God who gives him permission to do as his wife asks. So he gives Hagar some bread and a skin of water and sends them away. Hagar travels for a while. The water runs out. She puts Ishmael under a bush because she can't bear to watch him suffer. She collapses in tears. She is all alone and the world seems not to care. "Who will help her?" the text seems to scream. How can it be that the world will let her and her son die? When

all hope is lost, the Torah tells us that God opened her eyes and through *God's* assistance she sees a well. She fills the skin and Ishmael drinks. They both live and Ishmael grows up to be a powerful man.

“Who will help her?” – the answer seems to be, “God”. But what then is the message? Are we to learn that it is OK to farm out compassion and justice to Divine intervention? Surely not. Our rabbis don't allow this story to simply be about the graciousness and compassion of God. For us, for Jews, justice and compassion are *not* left up to the Divine. Instead, the rabbis reason, since humans were identified in Genesis as being made in the image of God, as partners with God, some read God's intervention here as an implicit criticism of Sarah and maybe even of Abraham: if it was actually *ethical* for Hagar and Ishmael to be cast out, why would God have to *interfere* to save their lives? As *Nachmonides*, a great medieval scholar and rabbi wrote, “Our matriarch sinned in this affliction, as did *Avraham* in permitting it.” If Abraham and Sarah had done the *right* thing from the beginning, or if anyone who might have witnessed the suffering of Hagar and Ishmael had helped, God would not have *had* to intervene, something

God does only on rare occasions for individuals. The rabbis see God's action, therefore, as God *modeling* for us what Abraham and Sarah *should have* known to do – to act with justice and compassion, instead of pettiness and cruelty. They should have known that to be the cause of someone's suffering, especially when they have done nothing wicked, is simply wrong. Instead, we must be the people, who like God, notices suffering and provides the well, so to speak, to feed, clothe and nurture those in need. On the day we mark the creation of the world our rabbis did *not* choose a Torah portion about the marvel of Genesis. Instead they picked a narrative that teaches us how we should continue to honor creation as constant partners with God in the perfecting of the world by using the Torah as an ethical guide to make just and righteous choices. Our tradition, therefore, honors the fundamental importance of living a righteous life, acknowledges how difficult it is to do so and then provides us with the tools to aid us in this sacred task.

In fact, from the beginning, our Jewish tradition has always been concerned about whether we build a just, moral and kind society. In addition to the narrative about Hagar, we are adjured in the Torah, over

and over, to care for the widow, the orphan and the downtrodden. We are given a *plethora* of laws concerning caring for the poor, even dictating how careful we need to be when collecting debts so as not to impinge on the dignity of the debtor. There are a series of explicit laws in the Torah concerning how we conduct business, prohibiting fraud, trickery and other unethical practices. We are commanded not to cause suffering to animals or to needlessly destroy trees and nature. And we have added to all of these foundational laws, *rituals*, at critical times, to remind us of the importance of a moral sensibility, like insisting we spill out some of our wine at the Passover *seder* to lament the loss of Egyptian life during our escape crossing the sea.

And I *do* think that it is this very legacy that drives the Israeli government and organizations like IsraAID to feel an obligation to be first responders to crises all over the world – helping nations like Haiti, Nepal, Uganda, Japan, Greece, and even the US, during earthquakes, hurricanes and tsunamis, at their own expense with no expectation of reward. And further, I think this foundational part of our religious tradition is responsible for the alphabet soup of Jewish organizations

dedicated to helping others, Jew and non-Jew alike, such as JUF, Maot Chittim, the Ark, JCFS, Shalva and so many others. Our Torah tells us, “Justice, Justice you shall **Pursue**” – it is a command to actively *chase* justice: to make sure that righteousness is at the forefront of who we are. It is a mitzvah that has always been a part of what it means to be a Jew and it is an imperative, especially now, that we must continue to honor today.

Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira lived in the 20th century and bore witness to, and died in, the Holocaust while acting as rabbi of the Warsaw Ghetto. His writings during that dark time survived. And out of a *mind* cultivated by Torah and the rabbinic tradition, and from a *life* lived in the depth of that horror, Rabbi Shapira concluded that every single act of kindness is another building block in creating a world of righteousness. The establishment of the process needed to create a just world, in his view, is the responsibility of every person in it. And the building of such a world is done one act at a time – we cannot hope that any other power will miraculously make this happen. God cannot

always be there to provide the well. It is up to us, therefore, God's partners and creations.

So how can we do it? In order to build this world of ultimate justice and kindness, he says, we have to train our souls to understand the **deep joy** of helping others. When we derive *joy* from being compassionate, when we reveal the truth that helping others brings *more* fulfillment than providing for pleasure in our own lives, more of us will act with righteousness. For example, listen to this reflection written by a volunteer from IsraAID, the not-for-profit that sends crisis relief teams from Israel to anywhere in the globe who needs help. He was part of the historic team you may have read about and which we learned about at *Selichot* that helped Syrian refugees escape to Greece from the horror of the civil war there. He said, "There is something about helping others in need that peels off the sense of self and ego. I am not medic and not a doctor but I carried, I waded out in the sea, I held IVs and I wrapped people with foil when they were cold. I carried babies and hugged mothers and comforted those who lost and those in shock. I helped children to change clothes and put a smile on their faces. . . . If anyone

asks me why I help . . . I say simply because that is what caring humans do when they see others in danger and in need, and I am *proud* to be *privileged* enough to give back.” This Israeli man spent several difficult days with little sleep and hard work in a foreign country assisting people he did not know personally, some of whom who might not even have had a positive view of Jews. Yet, the fulfillment and pride he felt in helping others and giving back lent a type of meaning and joy to his life that could not have been acquired in any other way.

Therefore, on the flip side, Shapira teaches that if the way to live a righteous life is by finding joy in helping others, there is a danger in what he calls the tendency of “*anochiyut*” or “I”ness, which begins innocuously simply as a certain *preoccupation* with one’s self, one’s status and the importance of one’s own ego. Yet, when one person exhibits too much “*anochiyut*”, Shapira claims, it then influences *other* people to prioritize the fulfillment of *their own* needs, since they experience the world as one in which the people around them are all preoccupied with only themselves. In a radical teaching, Shapira

explains that our soul is *not* static, it *reacts* to the world as it experiences the world. So when *we* are cared for, and when we see people caring for others, our soul learns the importance of caring and then *we* tend to care for others as well. When we do *not* experience the world as caring, reliable, and just, WE become less interested in being caring, reliable and just. Indifference leads to indifference. Righteous acts on behalf of others lead to more righteous acts. As our tradition states, “*Mitzvah Goreret Mitzvah*”, one *mitzvah* leads to another. Therefore *our* actions affect the moral attitude of those around us, multiplying their impact. We all *want* a kind and just world. Shapira teaches us the simple truth that we can only *create* it when each of us is able to discover **and live** the joy and meaning in acting righteously and caring for others on a regular basis.

So how does one become the type of person who chooses the joy of righteousness and is able to consistently demonstrate ethical behavior? One of the great Hasidic masters of 18th century Poland, Elimelekh of Lizensk, wrote a guide to righteous living. In it he identifies important stages to help us become the person we want to be

and he utilizes our great religious heritage to aid us in getting there. He begins as you might imagine a rabbi to begin, he writes that one should start with living a life of “Torah, Prayer and Mitzvot”. But for him this means one needs to immerse oneself in the value statements of our tradition, found in the Torah, in order to give oneself access to, and knowledge of, our tradition’s wisdom. In turn, we are to use these great insights to be able to address our ethical quandaries and the real life situations we confront. Next, one needs to pray in order to bring our core values to the front of our minds each day and to have a way to articulate them in a space that allows us time for reflection upon how we are, or are not, living these values in our actual lives. Without regular time each day to dwell on what we stand for, the values that we may have learned in Torah study could become separated from our lived existence.

And then, of course, we need to link both our learning and our prayer to our actions, doing the *mitzvot* that form the structure of what it means to be a Jew. For example, Shabbat is linked to the value of

welcoming guests and providing for *at least* one day each week that all Jews should eat well and be taken care of; or there is the mitzvah of giving *tzedakah*, which provides for the needs of those who require assistance of any kind, or visiting the sick, comforting the mourners, caring for the orphan etc. etc. All of these are core *mitzvot* and all are derived from the Torah *and* articulated in our prayers. The conscious intentional link between Torah, prayer and *mitzvot*, he teaches, will surely take us far down the desired path of leading an ethical life.

What is more, using a brilliant paradox he reassures us with an important insight. To live a life of righteousness, he teaches, we have to acknowledge that we cannot always exist on the highest moral and spiritual plane. Though we hope to lead righteous lives, we are not angels who are capable of extreme piety and immersive spirituality at all times. Human beings need to go out to dinner with friends, talk about sports or other hobbies and deal with everyday matters. To be righteous we do not have to be a saint – there are no Jewish heroes in our cannon above criticism or immune to the mundane matters of life. We should

not set an unrealistic bar of what it means to be a righteous person in this world or we will encourage something unachievable and therefore necessarily fail.

At the same time, though, he shares a powerful reminder, that *in those* mundane interactions we cannot let the influence of Jewish values disappear either. Quite the opposite, we must bring our ethics into those moments, albeit on a more subtle and realistic level. For example, *when* talking about everyday matters, do so kindly and with respect.

Righteousness in casual conversation is just as important as how we talk when we are studying Torah. When *sharing a meal* with others seek to be affirming and encouraging and avoid gossip. When running *errands* remember that others around you are not simply the tools to get today's checklist done but are people with their own goals for the day who deserve respect and attention as well. This balance between realism and idealism is crucial, he teaches, to building a just and kind society. The more one brings the ideal into the real and the more one habituates

oneself to this way of behaving, the more one shapes the proper righteous attitude that promotes living a just and kind life.

The Rebbe of Lishensk also reminds us that there is another serious danger to being consciously aware that we are intentionally trying to walk the righteous path – that danger is *self*-righteousness. He warns us: One should try to behave at the highest ethical level, *without* making others feel inferior or being overly critical of how others are behaving. Remember, *everyone* is only flesh and blood. For self-righteousness could eventually lead to an abuse of power or to a counter-productive expression of anger and frustration towards others: why am *I* the only righteous one? Why is *everyone else* so unevolved and immature? Citing Moses in a rare instance of criticism, he says Moses's most notable, if only momentary, sin – was when the Torah records that he *hit* the rock instead of speaking to it, as God instructed, while miraculously providing water for the people in the desert. Elimelekh teaches that in *that* moment Moses was so self-righteous, so frustrated that the Israelites were complaining about the food God was providing in

the wilderness, when he believed they should have been in awe of God's great miracles, that he became angry. And in his self-righteous anger he forgot the voice of God and *struck* the rock instead of speaking to it. It was his self-righteousness that disconnected him from the Divine and caused a distortion of God's voice. Included in being righteous, Elimelekh reminds us, is the ability to be modest and to see the divinity in *all* human beings.

This modesty, he teaches, of course must be balanced with the truth that our actions carry immense power, which is why our morality matters so much in the first place. This insight pairs nicely with our ancient Book of Wisdom, Pirkei Avot which asks, "*Ezeh hu gibur*"? Who is strong? The answer: "One who can conquer his own *yetzer*, his own inclinations." My colleague Rabbi Lisa Gruscow who serves along with me as a Hartman Institute Fellow, wrote an interesting take on this wise saying that is apropos. She said, "[Pirkei avot is not speaking about] Strength through discipline or strength through action. But instead: Strength through restraint. The *yetzer* is not an external enemy

that can be vanquished. It is an *internal* inclination. The rabbis teach that every human being has two inclinations, the good one (*yetzer hatov*) and the bad one (*yetzer hara*) – like the little devil and the little angel sitting on our cartoon shoulders. In every decision, the rabbis say, we have an internal battle between the two. Do I honk and swear at the person who cut me off in traffic, or do I give them a pass? Do I spread the juicy gossip, or do I bite my tongue? Do I take the ethical shortcut, or do I do the right thing, even if no one is looking?” Or if you are Abraham and Sarah: Do I send my son and loyal servant away to rid myself of the feeling of jealousy or do I refrain and do the right thing even though it hurts?

“Strength through restraint. It’s a counter-cultural concept. But have you ever wondered why two of the primary markers of Jewish practice are Shabbat and kashrut? We don’t even need to observe them in a traditional way to understand the point: You don’t *eat* everything you want. You don’t *do* everything you want. Long before Freud taught about ego and superego and id, Judaism gave us a way to develop our character by choosing to refrain . . . Anyone who has struggled with

addiction on any level knows the strength involved in not taking that first drink, or not reaching for the phone while driving, *not* doing what you know can and eventually will hurt you”.

She points out that the Bible gives us a *classic* strongman, Samson, who begins his career by tearing a lion into pieces with his bare hands, and ends it by toppling the pillars of the Philistine temple, even while blinded and bound. But the tragedy of Samson is that he is subject to his every whim, chasing after love, lust and revenge. He *can't* control his *yetzer*. And guess what, our tradition doesn't really talk much about Samson, despite his external strength. Instead, we tell the story of our patriarchs and matriarchs, of Moses and Aaron, and of our prophets – who represent spiritual and ethical strength.

We read in the Torah that God brought us out of *Egypt b'yad chazakah uvezeroa netuyah*, with a “strong hand and an outstretched arm”. What an extraordinary image! We usually think of a strong hand as a closed fist. But here we learn that God's strong hand is attached to an arm that reaches out. Because the fact is, the greatest strength takes

the form of compassion and righteousness on all levels: The adult child, caring for a parent with severe dementia. The parent repeating, “I hate you,” again and again and the child responding with patience and care. And the people, like those who volunteer with IsraAID who refuse to look away from the needs of others and who volunteer hour after hour at shul, at the soup kitchen, or fundraising for important causes because they know they can make a difference. They know that this is the kind of act that demonstrates strength and brings meaning to life. I see that strength in our congregation and am awed by it. I see that potential in each one of us today and I call on all of us to realize it as often as we can.

Because this is the joy and fulfillment that Elimelekh talks about in his ultimate step towards righteousness – the joy in recognizing the positive power of partnering with God to bring justice, love and compassion into the world. The one who walks the righteous path is also one who, though perhaps tired, is the one who feels fulfilled, satisfied and happy knowing they have chosen a sacred path.

If the Pew survey is correct - and I think it is - that a major reason we Americans associate with a religious community is to learn how to be better and more moral human beings, it should be clear to all of us that our tradition is rich in what it can teach about goodness, righteousness and compassion. And we can see in each other tonight people who desire to change, who desire to be good, and who desperately want to make choices that are righteous, compassionate and just, even if we haven't always done so in the past. My friends, we stand at the beginning of a new year, in the midst of the holiday of renewal. May we enter it with strength: Strength through compassion and strength through restraint. Strength through justice and strength through righteousness. As the Rebbe of Lihenssk taught, may we use our blessed tradition to learn our values, reflect on our ethics and then act on them in our everyday lives. May we hold Rabbi Shapira's words close to our heart and build that world of justice one act at a time and discover again and again the immense joy of helping others and pursuing justice. Our synagogue provides so many ways to do this here at Beth El, thorough study, prayer and the activities of our social action

committee as well as throughout our amazing Chicagoland Jewish community through so many sacred organizations. The opportunities are all at our fingertips. *Chazak chazak venitchazek* – As we bless each other in our tradition: may we be strong, may we be strong, and may we strengthen one other in our search to be the compassionate, righteous people we were created to be and may we use our beautiful tradition and the support of each other to achieve this shared and sacred goal.

Amen!