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KI TISSA

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THE SACRIFICE OF MOSES

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Did Moses see the face of God? Over the course of a single chapter, *Parashat Ki Tissa* gives what appear to be two contradictory answers to this question. In *Exodus 33:11*, the Torah declares that God indeed spoke to Moses face to face. Yet a mere nine verses later, after Moses requests to see God’s glory (*33:18*), God responds that “you are not able to see my face, for no person may see Me and live” (*33:20*).¹ Which is it? Did Moses see God’s face (as it were) or not?

The answer, I believe, lies in the context of each of these verses. It is after the sin of the Golden Calf. As *chapter 33* begins, Moses has convinced God not to wipe out the entire Jewish people, but God still refuses to enter into a real relationship with them again. God will send a *mal’akh* (angel/messenger) to take the Jewish people into the land of Canaan and fulfill His promise to our forefathers but will not be involved directly (*33:2-3*). Moses is to take his tent and pitch it outside of the camp (*33:7*), and only there will God engage in direct communication with him. It is only at this point, when Moses separates himself from his sinful nation, that God communicates with Moses “face to face.”²

But Moses refuses to accept this solution. Unflinchingly committed to the Jewish people, he insists that God accompany the Jewish people directly into the land of Canaan (*33:15-16*). God ultimately assents (*33:17*). It is then that Moses asks to see God’s glory, and God denies the request, “for no person may see Me and live.”

Rabbi S.R. Hirsch (on *Exodus 23:20*) offers a striking interpretation that leads us to a profound appreciation for the sacrifice that Moses made. Hirsch asserts (on the basis of *Vayikra Rabbah 1:1*) that the *mal’akh* referred to here—who would have accompanied the Jews into

Canaan—is none other than Moses himself. It is not a stretch to say that *mal’akh* refers to a prophet. There is ample precedent for the word simply meaning messenger, not necessarily a celestial being. Yet Hirsch’s comment may be more insightful than he intended. Moses is not entirely of this world. He is, in some sense, a celestial being. “He was there with God forty days and forty nights; he ate no bread and drank no water” (*Exodus 34:28*). No *person* may see God’s face. But Moses, the angelic being, could.

Yet Moses refused to live a solitary, angelic existence. He refused to stay up on the mountain, even metaphorically. He would not have a relationship with God that precluded the Jewish people’s relationship with God: “If you do not forgive their sin, erase me from Your book that You have written” (*Exodus 32:32*). God gives Moses the opportunity to lead the Jewish people and work to rehabilitate their relationship with God. But, this comes at a cost. When Moses asks again to see God’s glory, he is told, “No *person* may see Me and live.” If you choose to live among the people, to be a leader of human beings, God explains, your relationship to Me is tied up with theirs. You can no longer experience the pure angelic intimacy you once did.

The issue of Moses seeing God’s face resurfaces at the end of his life. Deuteronomy tells us, “There will never arise another prophet like Moses whom God knew face to face” (*34:10*). *Bava Batra 15a* and *Menahot 30a* record a debate as to who wrote the last eight verses in the Torah. Rabbi Shimon is of the opinion that Moses himself wrote them *be-dema*, which Rashi (*Menahot 30a s.v. mi-kan va-eilakh*) understands to mean “with tears in his eyes.” What was it about writing these eight verses that brings Moses to tears? It could be the simple fact that he is recording his own death, but perhaps there is more to it than that. He is not merely recording his own death; he is reading God’s epitaph to his life. Forty years prior, he gave up the opportunity to see God face to face in order to enable the Jewish people to have a relationship with God. He now reads that the thing he will be remembered for is being the one person who, for that one moment in history, saw God

face to face. I believe part of what R. Shimon is getting at is that, forty years later, Moses is still not sure if he made the right choice.

Moses's anguish is even more poignant when one considers God's last words spoken directly to Moses: "This is the land that I swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob saying, 'To your seed I will give it.' I have shown it to you with your eyes, but you shall not cross into" (Deuteronomy 34:4). If Hirsch is right, Moses could have gone into the land of Israel. He could have gone in as God's *mal'akh*. But he did not want to go in as God's *mal'akh*. He wanted to go in as leader of God's people, and in that mission he did not succeed. As he records his own epitaph, he is reminded of the choice he made forty years earlier that ultimately cost him the opportunity to enter the Promised Land. As he learns that what he will be remembered for is what he accomplished before that fateful choice, he sits in tears, wondering if he made the right decision.

A midrash in Sifrei (Devarim 34:1) may be making this same point. It records that when God told Moses he would not be the one to lead the Jewish people into the land of Canaan, Moses requested to step down as leader and enter as a private citizen. In putting such a request in Moses's mouth, the midrash is picking up on the idea that Moses knew it was his choice to be leader of the Jewish people that ultimately prevented him from realizing his dream of entering the Promised Land. Upon realizing his failure as a leader, he seeks to undo that choice, to go in not as a leader, but as an individual enjoying his private communion with God. But God informs him there is no going back.

Our understanding of why Moses's choice was irreversible may be deepened by understanding what it means to "see God's face." What is it that Moses so desperately wanted to see when he asked God, "Show me your glory"?

Berakhot 7a asserts that it is *tzaddik ve-ra lo* (why bad things happen to good people). It supports this idea with the verse (Exodus 33:19) where God tells Moses, "I will have compassion upon those whom I have compassion; I will have mercy upon those whom I have mercy." God, in other words, is telling Moses that he can never have a total understanding of how divine providence works in this world, by what criteria God decides who gets compassion and mercy and who does not. With a global understanding of how divine justice and providence work, perhaps Moses would have known that the generation of the Golden Calf was destined not to make it into the Promised Land. He would have known from the very beginning that a choice to lead them and work to repair their relationship with God was a choice to give up on the Promised Land for himself as well.³ But God did not permit him this foreknowledge. Like all human beings, he had to make a choice without full knowledge of the consequences.

Did he make the right choice? Was the Jewish people's failure to enter the Promised Land fated from the beginning, or was it a failure of his leadership? As Moses reads his epitaph, he is reminded that he forfeited the opportunity to know this.

He goes to his grave not knowing if he made the right choice. Ultimately, neither do we.

¹ Biblical translations are my own.

² Numbers 12:8 says that Moses gazed on God's *temunah*, but the commentaries there all assume that this is something less than seeing the face and is equivalent with seeing the back side as described in Exodus 33:23.

³ Cf. Midrash Tanhuma Hukat 10, which asserts that the fate of a shepherd and the fate of his flock are intertwined.

BEYOND THE MUSSAR SCHMOOZE: A PROPOSAL FOR MODERN ORTHODOX MORAL EDUCATION

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In a well-known joke, a yeshiva student finds that his milk cartons are routinely stolen from the dormitory refrigerator by one of his fellow students. After unsuccessful attempts to deter the thief by writing on the carton that stealing is a Torah prohibition, the milk owner has a brainwave and writes in big letters 'NOT CHOLOV YISROEL'! The next day, no milk is stolen, and the problem is solved.

I thought of this joke when reading an article by philosopher Eric Schwitzgebel who recounts a conversation he had with two bishops at a conference. He asked them if they thought that Christian clergy, on average, behaved better, the same, or worse than laypeople. One bishop replied that they are about the same whilst the other answered that clergy are worse!

Without limiting the conversation to members of the clergy, how would we answer the question if asked about Orthodox Jews? Do we behave better, the same, or worse than those who don't subscribe to Orthodox Judaism?

To be sure, we could list countless examples of Torah personalities who exhibited outstanding ethical clarity and emotional sensitivity. The lives of Torah luminaries such as Rabbis Aryeh Levin, Moshe Feinstein, and Shlomo Zalman Auerbach provide proof of the capacity of Torah life and wisdom to yield outstanding moral personalities. Nevertheless, excellence in these spheres seems not to be a hallmark of contemporary Orthodox society. In my experience, commitment to Orthodoxy too rarely entails a sensitivity to the cognitive and affective components of ethical life. Orthodox Jewry has not yet succeeded in setting the benchmark for ethically exemplary behaviour. Occasionally, one encounters inspiring counter-examples such as Sara Kestenbaum who changed the life of Yale Professor Stephen Carter and Aaron Feuerstein, the legendary Mensch of Malden Mills. In such lives we find examples of the *middot* and idealism which should characterise Orthodox commitment. At the same time, it leaves us wondering why we don't encounter such examples more frequently.

Indeed, in the last few years there has been much discussion in the Orthodox community of appropriate

communal attitudes, particularly regarding politicians whose policies may serve Orthodox interests, but whose behavior is manifestly lacking in personal virtue.

Below, I argue in favor of an expanded and systematized approach toward character education in the Modern Orthodox community. In particular, I highlight behavioural science research and the character education movement as important resources for the community to utilize in enhancing our educational strategy. Moving in this direction would empower us to impart and promote values at the core of our faith, as well as inspiring confidence that our religious institutions can nurture the values and virtues to which they subscribe.

Beyond Halakhah

Many attempts to promote moral behavior in the community focus on imparting knowledge of Halakhah in *mitzvot bein adam le-havero*. These include, for example, laudable projects promoting the regular study of *Sefer Hafetz Haim* and *Sefer Ahavat Hesed*. Rabbi Micha Berger, a veteran *mussar* educator, notes that even those diligent students who show up for "Mussar Seder" in yeshiva, often choose the laws of *Lashon ha-Ra* as their topic of study, rather than more conceptual or inspirational literature.

The Orthodox community should be proud of its fealty to Halakhah. The halakhic lens that is the linchpin of our worldview connects us to the previous generations of Jews in seeking to follow God's will as understood through our *mesorah*.

This notwithstanding, a preoccupation with technical halakhic compliance often overshadows other essential features of moral life.

Many have argued with great cogency that Jewish ethical life requires much more than strict halakhic compliance. Rabbi Menahem Meiri (Commentary to *Avot* 3:17), in explaining Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah's assertion that 'if there is no *derekh eretz*, there is no Torah', explains that one does not completely fulfill one's obligations through adherence to what is specified explicitly in the Torah and Halakhah. The Meiri specifically mentions 'developing good *middot*' and 'distancing oneself from bad *middot*' as obligations which are not explicated in the Torah but are incumbent upon every Jew.

Rabbi Yosef Albo¹ and the Netziv² follow the Ramban's lead³ in explaining that *Halakhah* cannot provide specific instruction for every conceivable situation. There are many scenarios in which there will be no halakhic prescription

and one needs to be guided by an awareness and understanding of Jewish ethical principles.

This highlights the danger of a pure identification of Torah ethics with Halakhah, and an acceptance of the law's minimum requirements as an appropriate standard for moral behavior. On such a misunderstanding, it follows that, in situations for which Jewish law contains no clear-cut halakhic instructions, there can be no ethical requirements. And it is precisely that error that Ramban and others were so concerned to avoid.

Moreover, an overwhelming and unbalanced focus on halakhic requirements and prohibitions in Orthodox life can have the insidious effect of decreasing regard for the importance of character development. If one is part of a society where discussions of normative behavior are all concerned with legal requirements, little room is given for the development of ethical understanding or emotional resonance.

Observing this phenomenon, Rabbi Yehuda Amital bemoaned a public regarding itself as committed to Halakhah, for whom fundamental values such as "You shall be holy" and "You shall do what is upright in the eyes of God" had lost their validity.

At best, a failure to integrate detailed halakhic observance with overarching normative principles results in a mediocre representation of a Torah lifestyle. At worst, it leads to unethical and illegal activities, justified by arguments (plausible or otherwise) for their technical acceptability.

A Modern Orthodox character education should complement teaching of technical Halakhah with an imparting of the ideals, values, and insights that animate those laws.

More fundamentally, our educational goals need to be defined before we develop a strategy to get there. Our community has been blessed with several outstanding scholars who have advanced a variety of nuanced approaches to understanding the interplay between Torah and ethics. As Rabbi Dr Barry Kislowicz has argued, we would be well served by using the writings and teachings of figures such as Rav Soloveitchik, Rav Lichtenstein, Rav Amital, and Rabbi Walter Wurzburger as a foundation for our efforts in moral education.

Beyond the Cognitive

Of course, many people do study Jewish ethics but still fail to live by them.

A parallel to this very phenomenon is discussed in the article I cited at the beginning in which Schwitzgebel reflects on his research into the ethical behaviour of philosophers specialising in ethics. Schwitzgebel's research (and that of fellow philosopher Joshua Rust) reveals that "[n]ever once have we found ethicists as a whole behaving better than our comparison group of other professors, by any of our planned measures."

Veteran educator Rabbi Jack Bieler shares a comparable reflection from his experience of Jewish schools:

Can we confidently say that the typical manner of speech, dress, interaction with peers, types of after-school recreation, deportment towards teachers, administrators and even parents truly reflect internalized Jewish and spiritual values, or have Jewish learning and experience been compartmentalized, and are only called upon within specific frameworks and at finite times during the day?"

These reflections indicate the limited impact of studying values in a purely cognitive way. Methods need to be identified to teach in a way which profoundly impacts the students, and to cultivate an environment in which character development is nurtured.

In recent decades, psychologists and educators have produced, developed, and assessed various methodologies to effectively impart moral values in a way that impacts the student's inner character, attitude, and behavior. These approaches help students to develop goals which they care deeply about and contribute to the world beyond themselves. Beyond this, character educators give their students the guidance and skills to achieve these things. Many teachers use social-emotional learning which teaches skills such as cooperation and bias awareness to help students to build better relationships and make ethical, caring decisions. Others use mindfulness to deepen students' awareness of the connection between their emotions, thoughts, and bodily sensations, enabling them to better regulate their emotions. The best of these methodologies are based on a broad understanding of what facilitates and reinforces the ethical personality. These can be useful to the Modern Orthodox community in its efforts to improve the efficacy of our character education.

Beyond Schools

Robert Cialdini, considered by many to be the leading social scientist in the field of influence, has argued that

‘[w]e view a behavior as more correct in a given situation to the degree that we see others performing it’ (Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion, p.116). More recently, he has argued that we are particularly influenced by the behavior of those with whom we feel a special affiliation, such as those with the same religion or ethnicity. This thesis has also been corroborated by research showing that we are more disposed toward unethical behavior when we see it practiced by those who consider to be part of our ‘in-group’.

This underscores the crucial importance of a communal environment that buttresses the moral culture fostered in schools. We need a social framework within which our ethical values are valorized and represent the norms of our community. Too often, we learn through observing social norms that driving on Shabbat is totally off limits but speaking badly about others – to mention but one example – is acceptable. Our aspirations for self-improvement are lowered, even to levels below that required by Halakhah, when our community experience confirms that such standards are not considered essential for Orthodox life.

Students need to see what they learn as expressive of broader communal values. Success in this area requires the engagement of other communal organizations, including camps, youth movements, and synagogue leadership. It also signals the importance of adult education. Rabbi Micha Berger puts it well: “Aside from needing to improve ourselves as adults for our own sake, we are also powerless to change the culture for the next generation without providing more role models in the current one.”

As Dr. Aharon Hersh Fried argues in an important article on character education in the Orthodox community, this integrated approach is necessary for our success:

“We must understand that there is no one method, factor, or place (such as school, home, synagogue, or neighborhood, Mussar learning, role models, active hessed programs, and so forth) that, can by itself, assure the development of middot and derekh eretz in our children... We must become aware of all relevant factors and how they interact—and keep them in mind when we educate our children.”

Toward a Modern Orthodox Character Education Movement

The past 35 years have seen a resurgence of academic interest in character, particularly in the fields of moral and developmental psychology, behavioral economics, and sociology. Researchers have tackled some of the key issues

raised above. Does moral knowledge lead to moral behavior? What is the impact of the values alignment of the school, family, and community?

Based partly on this research, theorists and practitioners have argued in favor of various educational approaches to imparting moral values. Scholars and educators collaborate in such study through organizations such as The Association for Moral Education which offer evidence-based workshops on topics such as “How to Teach about Corruption”, “Moral Identity Development”, and “Integrating Theatre into Moral Education”. A plethora of initiatives have been developed to implement these approaches to guide and reinforce character development of young children, adolescents, and adults. Numerous institutions promote the continued study, promotion, and implementation of ethical awareness, understanding, and behavior in educational organizations, community, and society.

Organizations such as Character Education Partnership have guided schools in adopting intentional, proactive, and comprehensive approaches to promoting the core values in all phases of school life. In this endeavor, all aspects of schooling are used – the discipline policy, the assessment of learning, the management of the school environment, relationship with parents – as an opportunity for character development. They also ensure that progress is assessed, and that schools, families, and communities collaborate as full partners in the character-building effort.

Effective character education in our Modern Orthodox community will be best achieved by systematizing the use of such academic, educational, and institutional resources to support a focused, comprehensive commitment to the knowledge, internalization, and application of ethics.

As stated above, this movement should be intentionally grounded in Modern Orthodox thought. Rav Soloveitchik’s understanding of the place of emotion in moral life supports concentrating on developing the affective side of the moral personality. Rav Lichtenstein’s emphasis on Halakhah’s demand for personal sacrifice offers an important corrective to the excessive focus on self-esteem and self-fulfillment in parts of the character education movement. Rav Amital’s argument for the significance of natural morality in Jewish ethics underscores the importance of cultivating the innate moral intuition. Rabbi Wurzbarger’s view that a moral “ought” derives from a sense of obligation evoked by Divine command has instructive implications for the attitude to moral life that we teach in our schools and communities.

Within the contours developed through careful study of these thinkers, the movement will seek to learn from the initiatives of schools such as Hilltop Elementary, the ShIPLEY School, The Kennedy Middle School, and the high schools documented in Suny Cortland's Smart and Good High School's study. Within the Jewish world, the emphasis on middot at Gann Academy in Waltham, MA, provides an instructive example of a holistic approach to teaching, inculcating, and applying virtues. It will also be important to learn from the experience of schools such as Shalhevet High School in Los Angeles which trailblazed the integration of Lawrence Kohlberg's methodology in an Orthodox context to understand which elements of their program succeeded and endured and why certain components were discontinued.

I believe that there is a need for the collaborative networking of schools, camps, youth groups, adult education programs, and synagogues in our community to communicate, teach, and live the ethical values which are so foundational to our faith more effectively. If we can identify untapped potential in systematically developing the moral climate in our communal institutions, we will be moving closer to the high standing that is our calling.

¹ *Sefer Ha-Ikkarim* III:23.

² *Ha-Emek Davar*, Exodus 19:6.

³ *Commentary to the Torah*, Deuteronomy 6:18.

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