

THE SHORTEST PATH BETWEEN TWO POINTS

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Several years ago we learned of an incident that occurred at an *oneg* following our congregation's Friday evening Shabbat service. Two women, both of whom were born Jewish, were gossiping about another member of the congregation. They were proclaiming to one another that the woman they were talking about had told other members of the congregation that she was Jewish when in fact she was not.

Both of these women may have imagined themselves to be righteously exposing a fraud. But regardless of whether or not the woman they were talking about was Jewish, the failure of these two women who were gossiping was that their behavior was less righteous than self-righteous.

Setting aside the issue of gossip momentarily, the *mitzvot* (commandments) to act righteously are often troubling for many modern Jews, because the thought that we personally should aspire to righteousness may strike us as arrogant, out of synch with the day-to-day reality of situational ethics and moral autonomy.

Not surprisingly, Jewish tradition has a great deal to teach us on the subject of righteousness.

Noah is the first righteous person we meet in the Torah, a *tzadik* (צדיק): "Noah was a righteous man, perfect [תמים] in his generation; Noah walked [התהלך] with God." (Genesis 6:9)

We should understand first, Noah lived during a time that in many respects was like our own—"his generation was guilty of random violence," with all that accompanies it, according to Rabbeinu Bachya (Rabbi Bachya ben Asher, 1255-1340). "The wantonness of this generation was in a measure due to the ideal conditions under which mankind lived before the flood. . . . [and] in their arrogance they rose up against God." (*Legends of the Jews* on Midrash Tanhuma, Bereshit 12)

Or Hachayim (Rabbi Chaim ben Attar, 1696-1744) tells us that, ". . . The word תמים [i.e., perfect, lacking nothing] is a reference to Noah's lifestyle. . . ."—his day-to-day behavior. "He chose to be more considerate than required by law." Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch (1808-1888) remarks (on Exodus 12:3-6) that, "תמים [is] the complete surrender of the *whole* of oneself . . . to get nearer to God, just as the preliminary condition for the covenant of Abraham was ודיה תמים לפני (". . . walk before Me and be perfect"—Genesis 17:1).

Rabbeinu Bachya comments that the reflexive conjugation of the verb "to walk," התהלך, should be understood to mean, "he [Noah] made himself walk" with God, which suggests the likelihood that his righteousness was the result of self-discipline, not an inborn character trait.

Or Hachayim says that, "When the Torah here employs התהלך . . . this merely emphasizes that Noah *kept* walking with god," despite the obstacles he encountered. Noah wasn't deterred by the fads or fashions of his time, nor by fear of ridicule or rejection from those who mocked his commitment to righteousness.

Akeidat Yitzchak (Rabbi Yitzchak ben Moshe Arama, 1420-1494) teaches: "Noah is praised for not following the wicked ways of the age of Enosh, but for choosing to serve his maker. . . . He didn't make common cause with the people of the generation of the deluge" [i.e., the flood].

But why should Noah be praised for simply not following the wickedness of his time?

Akeidat Yitzchak suggests the answer by pointing to the ultimate reach of one individual bent on perverting the purposes of a congregational community: "One can conceive of the universe as an orchestra in which each instrument plays its assigned part. Should an instrument fail consistently, the disharmony created will disable the entire orchestra."

Imagine that one member of a congregation is intent on engaging others in gossip. One by one, this person recruits allies who destroy the harmony of the congregation. This scenario, while not the norm, is not uncommon, typically producing destructive conflict and a crisis that saps the spirit and energy of the congregation before it's finally resolved.

Now recall, if you can, an instance when you remained silent or, by word or facial expression, even affirmed destructive gossip, behavior that you possibly rationalized to yourself with self-righteous explanations. Many of us have great difficulty avoiding gossip, the evil of *lashon hara*, literally evil tongue, which is reciprocally related to self-righteousness, because they tend to feed one another. The problem is that it's not easy to challenge *lashon hara*: often we don't have the courage because we fear the rejection that may ensue; often we simply don't know how to rebuke with kindness.

Our commentator the Sforno (Rabbi Ovadia ben Yaakov, 1470-1550), points out that, “He [Noah] walked in God’s ways, doing good to others and *reproving his contemporaries*, as our Sages tell us.” (Our emphasis.) Akeidat Yitzchak adds that, “By following the commandments, he achieved an understanding of how things relate in this world.” He knew that reproof effectively clarifies tensions between people and ultimately reduces the distance between them, which otherwise eventually destroys all that is godly.

Common decency and ordinary kindness, even forgetting the prohibitions against gossip and self-righteousness, should have prevented those two women from disparaging the *yichus* (family lineage—יחוס) of another person. (There are, of course, appropriate actions they could have taken if they were convinced that the woman in question was perpetrating a fraud that would be damaging to the congregational community or its members.)

Self-righteousness is commonly the result of an arrogance that we personally are to be the authors of all principles and practices in the conduct of social life. Do we imagine when affecting such arrogance that we are superior teachers and judges of morality, or are we simply experiencing a failure of imagination or its opposite, a flight of fantasy? Who among us would replace the wisdom of the Torah with their own personal moral vision, calling all the rest of us to him or her as the arbiter and oracle of universal moral law for all Jews? Such self-righteousness is forbidden because of what it leads to: behavior, such as *lashon hara*, which poisons and ultimately destroys individuals, families, and communities.

The Torah’s *mitzvot*, the commandments, serve as the integral and essential spiritual and religious infrastructure of our mundane, day-to-day existence. We learn from Rabbi (Rabbi Judah HaNasi, 138-220) that the shortest distance between two points is a *derech y’shara* (דֶּרֶךְ יִשְׂרָאֵל), a path that is straight, just and upright, which is the Torah’s map to whatever worthwhile goal we seek: the shortest path to a higher education, to a productive job, to a successful marriage, to a fulfilling family life, or to a safe and secure community.

As Akeidat Yitzchak teaches, individual and communal failure to navigate the *derech y’shara* leads to a “perversion in man [that] ultimately results in major malfunctions in the cosmic forces controlling the universe.”

Is this an exaggeration?

Possibly Akeidat Yitzchak magnifies the impact of humankind, since the universe is huge and complex, and our behavior seemingly has little effect on the cosmos. But humankind’s immoral actions

have amply demonstrated the capacity to destroy the ecosystems of the planet, in addition to nations, communities, families, and individuals. We imagine that if or when members of the human family get off this planet in significant numbers, we’ll continue to create cosmic “malfunctions,” only on a larger scale.

Following Torah’s moral law is not a matter of being compelled to live up to antiquated notions of right and wrong, but our own discovery and decision to employ the most effective and efficient means of dealing with the challenges and pressures that life presents to us. We do so as a practical matter by continuously struggling to respond positively to our *yetzer hatov* (good inclination) and to redirect our *yetzer hara* (evil inclination). The conditions of the struggle that enable each of us to remain permanently on the path of righteousness require our recognition that we are not perfect, but in the process of becoming more perfect, growing toward Jewish moral perfection, both in Torah knowledge and our day-to-day conduct—because, if we’re practicing Judaism, our action in the world without guidance from Torah is morally mindless, and knowledge of Torah without our action in the world is morally meaningless.

Committing ourselves to moral self-perfection, to work at consistent moral decisions and actions, means we recognize that we have the capacity to stop making moral mistakes. It is the recognition that within us there is a spark of holiness, an image of God, which we may choose to activate by preparing ourselves—through study, by separating ourselves from that which degrades and destroys life, and by dedicating our day-to-day energy to discovering the *derech y’shara*—to take the shortest path between two points.

There is a story about how the Hasidim asked their rabbi “the Seer of Lublin,” Who is greater, [one who is] “perfectly righteous” or [one who has] “great” standing in the world? “He told them: ‘You too go out and see, if someone comes to recite a בִּרְכָה [blessing over bread] and there are two loaves in front of him, one is a large loaf of bread but sliced, not complete; and one is small but complete—on which of them does he say the blessing of הַמְרִיצָה? Do you do so on the large one that is sliced or on the small one that is whole?’ You learn from here if you have a choice between something that is whole and complete, yet small; and something that is large and incomplete—the complete thing is preferred.” (Rabbi Mordechai Hacohen, 1906-1972, *Al Hatorah*, Genesis 6:9)

So a righteous Jew, even one whose family has not practiced Judaism for one or more generations,

is to be preferred to an incomplete Jew, one who self-righteously engages in destructive gossip.

Incidentally, regarding the woman whose Jewish credentials were the subject of synagogue gossip: She certainly was Jewish, since one is Jewish if one's mother, maternal grandmother, maternal great grandmother, etc., were Jewish. It doesn't

matter, according to *halakha* (Jewish law), if two or three generations back, one of those women who was born Jewish or legitimately converted to Judaism, later converted to Christianity or some other religion, even if she was baptized or otherwise formally renounced Judaism. Her offspring through her maternal descendants are nonetheless Jewish.

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