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## Effective Rebuke

*You shall surely rebuke your fellow man, and you shall not bear a sin over him. (19:17)*

All Jews are responsible for each other. Therefore, if a Jew sees another committing a sin, he must rebuke him and set him straight. But how does one rebuke another Jew? This is a very difficult thing to do. In fact, it is one of the most difficult *mitzvos* to perform properly.

The final words of the commandment are “*velo sisa alav cheit*, and you shall not bear a sin over him.” What exactly does this mean? Rashi explains that if you embarrass the person you are rebuking, you are committing a sin. This is an important guideline for the *mitzvah* of giving rebuke. It must be done carefully, discreetly and

oh so gently. Otherwise, you will embarrass him. Then you will not only have failed in your rebuke, but you will also have committed a very grave sin.

Rav Gedaliah Schorr suggests a further interpretation based on a variant translation of the words *velo sisa alav cheit*. They can be read as “do not raise up the sin over him.” Do not magnify the sin and minimize the person.

If you see someone doing a sin, do not place the emphasis on the magnitude of the sin. Do not say, “How could you do such a terrible thing?” You are raising up the sin over him, dwarfing him by the magnitude of what he has done. You are making the person feel about two inches tall. This is not the way to offer rebuke. It is offensive, and it is also almost guaranteed to be ineffective. Better to place the emphasis on the person and say, “How could a person such as you do such a thing?” Better to raise him up over the sin, to show him that to do such a thing is beneath him, that he is too great to do such a thing. This is the way to rebuke with genuine kindness and lasting effect.

A rabbi was once asked to be guest speaker in a neighboring town, and he chose rebuke as his topic. After speaking about the importance of giving rebuke properly, he told a story.

“I do not know this story firsthand,” he began. “But I’ve heard many times, and I believe its is true. The Chafetz Chaim had a *yeshivah* in the Polish town of Radin. In those days, during the early part of the 20th century, there were many pressures on *yeshivah* boys. Some of their peers were leaving their faith and seeking greener pastures in socialism, secular Zionism

or just plain secularism. I suppose it was inevitable that some of the boys in the *yeshivos* would also be affected, that a tiny number of them would do things no *yeshivah* boy would do today.

“One of the boys in the Chafetz Chaim’s *yeshivah* was caught smoking on Shabbos. The Chafetz Chaim was told about it, and he summoned the boy to his room. The boy stayed in the Chafetz Chaim’s room for about two minutes, and afterward, he kept Shabbos scrupulously.

“Can you imagine what the Chafetz Chaim’s rebuke must have been like? Ah, if only we could have an inkling of what went on in that room for those two minutes! What did the Chafetz Chaim say to this boy? It would be like a beacon of light for us. I’m sure all of us would love to know what he said. But we don’t. And so we just have to try and do the best we can.”

After the rabbi finished speaking, a man came over to him. His face was tear stained. “Rabbi, I can tell you what the Chafetz Chaim said to that boy,” he declared. “You see, I was that boy.”

The rabbi was stunned. “Please tell me,” he whispered.

“When I was called to the Chafetz Chaim’s room,” he said, “I was terrified. What could I say to the great *tzaddik*? How could I justify smoking on Shabbos? And right in his *yeshivah*! I couldn’t even justify it to myself. It was one of those rash and foolish things young people often do without thinking. I walked into his room, and there, he was, his holy face distorted in a grimace of pain. He walked over to me, his head barely reaching to my chest, and he took my hand in his.

‘Shabbos,’ he said softly, and he began to weep. After a minute, he looked up at me and said it again, ‘Shabbos.’ His hot tears dripped onto my hands, and the sound of his weeping penetrated my heart. That was all it took. Two minutes of the Chafetz Chaim’s pain.”

The Chafetz Chaim did not put this boy down. He did not berate him or belittle him. He gently but powerfully impressed on him the sacred nature of Shabbos. That was the most effective rebuke he could have given him.

## Rabbi Akiva’s Principle

One of Rabbi Akiva’s most famous sayings is, “*Ve’ahavta lereicha kamocho*. Love your neighbor as you do yourself. This is a fundamental principle of the Torah.” This *mitzvah* is one of the pillars of the entire Torah. We find a similar thought expressed by Hillel. The Talmud relates (*Shabbos* 31a) that a prospective gentile convert to Judaism asked Hillel to teach him the entire Torah “while standing on one foot.” Hillel replied, “Do not do to others that which is hateful to you. This is the essence of Torah. All the rest is explanation.”

It seems to me that Rabbi Akiva was most suited to speak about the importance and centrality of this *mitzvah*. Rabbi Akiva was a great *rosh yeshivah* with many thousands of students, and he experienced a shattering tragedy. All of his twenty-four thousand students died during the Omer period between Pesach and Shavuot. It is an incredible number, a number that fails to penetrate the consciousness even in our day of huge *yeshivos*.

How would one of us have dealt with such a blow? What would we have done if all twenty-four thousand  $\frac{3}{4}$  twenty-four thousand!  $\frac{3}{4}$  of our students had died in one fell swoop due to some character flaw, a catastrophe that inevitably must have reflected somewhat negatively on their *rosh yeshivah*? First, we would, of course, have to deal with a serious bout of depression and despondency. And if we managed to get over that, we would probably retire with a broken heart.

What did Rabbi Akiva do? The Talmud tells us (*Yevamos 62b*), “When Rabbi Akiva’s students died and the world was desolate, he went to the south of Eretz Yisrael and started over again!”

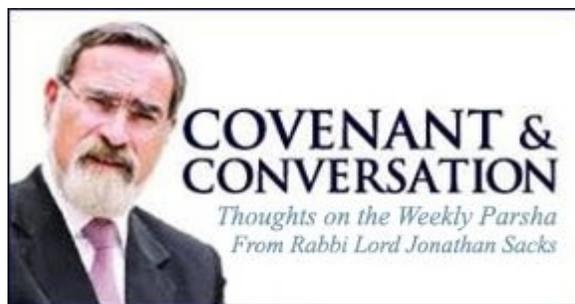
Rabbi Akiva clearly had unbelievable resilience. No matter how great a disaster he suffered, he would find a silver lining in the darkest cloud. He would discover something positive, something to give him new hope, and this would give him the strength and the confidence to start all over again. “All is not lost!” he would exult when he had lost just about everything.

Rabbi Akiva lived through the destruction of the *Beis Hamikdash*. The Talmud relates (*Makkos 24a*) that several Sages were walking past the ruined *Beis Hamikdash* and saw a fox emerging from the site of the Holy of Holies. They all burst into tears, except for Rabbi Akiva, who began to laugh. “Why do you laugh?” they asked him. He replied, “Because if the prophecy of destruction has come true so literally, then the prophecy of redemption will also come true literally.”

This ability to find the glimmer of light in the deepest darkness, to find the positive, the spark of hope, in the worst of times, made Rabbi Akiva

singularly attuned to the *mitzvah* of loving others. He – more than anyone else – was able to see the worth in all people and love them for it.

The Baal Shem Tov give us an additional insight into the concept of loving your neighbor “as you do yourself.” When a person gets up in the morning and takes stock of himself, he thinks, “I am basically a good person. I have my faults and foibles; I am not perfect. But I am more good than bad.” This, the Baal Shem Tov says, is how we must evaluate our neighbor. He is basically good. I can overlook his faults.



### The Ethic of Holiness

Kedoshim contains the two great love commands of the Torah. The first is, “*Love your neighbour as yourself*. I am the Lord” (Lev. 19:18). Rabbi Akiva called this “the great principle of the Torah.” The second is no less challenging: “The stranger living among you must be treated as your native-born. *Love him as yourself, for you were strangers in Egypt*. I am the Lord your God” (Lev. 19:34).

These are extraordinary commands. Many civilisations contain variants of the Golden Rule: “Do unto others as you would have them do to you,” or in the negative form attributed to Hillel (sometimes called the Silver Rule), “What is

hateful to you, do not do to your neighbour. That is the whole Torah. The rest is commentary; go and learn.”<sup>1</sup> But these are rules of reciprocity, not love. We observe them because bad things will happen to us if we don’t. They are the basic ground-rules of life in a group.

Love is something altogether different and more demanding. That makes these two commandments a revolution in the moral life. Judaism was the first civilisation to put love at the heart of morality. As Harry Redner puts it in *Ethical Life*, “Morality is the ethic of love. The initial and most basic principle of morality is clearly stated in the Torah: Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.” He adds: “The biblical “love of one’s neighbour” is a very special form of love, a unique development of the Judaic religion and unlike any to be encountered outside it.”<sup>2</sup>

Much has been written about these commands. Who exactly is meant by “your neighbour”? Who by “the stranger”? And what is it to love someone else as oneself? Here though I want to ask a different question. *Why is it specifically here, in Kedoshim, in a chapter dedicated to the concept of holiness, that the command appears?*

Nowhere else in all Tanach are we commanded to love our neighbour. And only in one other place (Deut. 10:19) are we commanded to love the stranger. (The Sages famously said that the Torah commands us thirty-six times to love the stranger, but that is not quite accurate. Thirty-four of those commands have to do with not oppressing or afflicting the stranger and making sure that he or she has the same legal rights as

the native born. These are commands of justice rather than love).

And why does the command to love your neighbour as yourself appear in a chapter containing such laws as “Do not mate different kinds of animals. Do not plant your field with two kinds of seed. Do not wear clothing woven of two kinds of material.” These are *chukim*, decrees, usually thought of as commands that have no reason, at any rate none that we can understand. What have they to do with the self-evidently moral commands of the love of neighbour and stranger? Is the chapter simply an assemblage of disconnected commands, or is there a single unifying strand to it?

The answer goes deep. Almost every ethical system ever devised has sought to reduce the moral life to a single principle or perspective. Some connect it to reason, others to emotion, yet others to consequences: do whatever creates the greatest happiness for the greatest number. Judaism is different. It is more complex and subtle. It contains not one perspective but three. There is the prophetic understanding of morality, the priestly perspective and the wisdom point of view.

Prophetic morality looks at *the quality of relationships within a society*, between us and God and between us and our fellow humans. Here are some of the key texts that define this morality. God says about Abraham, “For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right [*tzedakah*] and just [*mishpat*].”<sup>3</sup> God tells Hosea, “I will betroth you to Me in righteousness [*tzedek*] and justice

[*mishpat*], in kindness [*chessed*] and compassion [*rachamim*].”<sup>4</sup> He tells Jeremiah, “I am the Lord, who exercises kindness [*chessed*], justice [*mishpat*] and righteousness [*tzedakah*] on earth, for in these I delight, declares the Lord.”<sup>5</sup> Those are the key prophetic words: righteousness, justice, kindness and compassion – not love.

When the Prophets talk about love it is about God’s love for Israel and the love we should show for God. With only three exceptions, they do not speak about love in a moral context, that is, vis-à-vis our relationships with one another. The exceptions are Amos’ remark, “Hate evil, love good; maintain justice in the courts” (Amos 5:15); Micah’s famous statement, “Act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with your God” (Mic. 6:8) and Zechariah’s “Therefore love truth and peace” (Zech. 8:19). Note that all three are about loving abstractions – good, mercy and truth. They are not about people.

The prophetic voice is about how people conduct themselves in society. Are they faithful to God and to one another? Are they acting honestly, justly, and with due concern for the vulnerable in society? Do the political and religious leaders have integrity? Does society have the high morale that comes from people feeling that it treats its citizens well and calls forth the best in them? A moral society will succeed; an immoral or amoral one will fail. That is the key prophetic insight. The Prophets did not make the demand that people love another. That was beyond their remit. Society requires justice, not love.

The *wisdom* voice in Torah and Tanach looks at character and consequence. If you live virtuously, then by and large things will go well for you. A good example is Psalm 1. The person who occupies himself with Torah will be “like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither—whatever they do prospers.” That is the wisdom voice. Those who do well, fare well. They find happiness (*ashrei*). Good people love God, family, friends and virtue. But the wisdom literature does not speak of loving your neighbour or the stranger.

The moral vision of the Priest that makes him different from the Prophet and Sage lies in the key word *kadosh*, “holy.” Someone or something that is holy is set apart, distinctive, different. The Priests were set apart from the rest of the nation. They had no share in the land. They did not work as labourers in the field. Their sphere was the Tabernacle or Temple. They lived at the epicentre of the Divine Presence. As God’s ministers they had to keep themselves pure and avoid any form of defilement. They were holy.

Until now, holiness has been seen as a special attribute of the Priest. But there was a hint at the giving of the Torah that it concerned not just the children of Aaron but the people as a whole: “You shall be to Me a *kingdom of priests* and a *holy nation*” (Ex. 19:6). Our chapter now spells this out for the first time. “The Lord said to Moses, “Speak to *the entire assembly of Israel* and say to them: Be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy” (Lev. 19:1-2). This tells us that the ethic of holiness applies not just to Priests but to the entire nation. It too is to be distinctive, set apart, held to a higher standard.

What in practice does this mean? A decisive clue is provided by another key word used throughout Tanach in relation to the Kohen, namely the verb *b-d-l*: to divide, set apart, separate, distinguish. That is what a Priest does. His task is “to *distinguish* between the sacred and the secular” (Lev. 10:10), and “to *distinguish* between the unclean and the clean” (Lev. 11:47). This is what God does for His people: “You shall be holy to Me, for I the Lord am holy, and I have *distinguished* you [*va-avdil*] from other peoples to be Mine.” (Lev. 20:26).

There is one other place in which *b-d-l* is a key word, namely the story of creation in Genesis 1, where it occurs five times. God *separates* light and dark, day and night, upper and lower waters. For three days God demarcates different domains, then for the next three days He places in each its appropriate objects or life-forms. God fashions order out of the *tohu va-vohu* of chaos. As His last act of creation, He makes man after His “image and likeness.” This was clearly an act of love. “Beloved is man,” said Rabbi Akiva, “because he was created in [God’s] image.”<sup>6</sup>

Genesis 1 defines the priestly moral imagination. Unlike the Prophet, the Priest is not looking at society. He is not, like the wisdom figure, looking for happiness. He is looking at creation as the work of God. He knows that everything has its place: sacred and profane, permitted and forbidden. It is his task to make these distinctions and teach them to others. He knows that different life forms have their own niche in the environment. That is why the ethic of holiness includes rules like: Don’t mate with different kinds of animals, don’t plant a field with

different kinds of seed, and don’t wear clothing woven of two kinds of material.

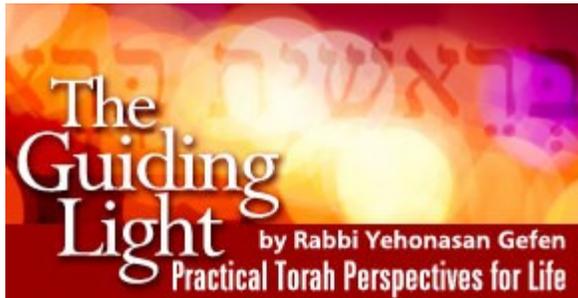
Above all the ethic of holiness tells us that every human being is made in the image and likeness of God. God made each of us in love. *Therefore, if we seek to imitate God* – “Be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy” – *we too must love humanity*, and not in the abstract but in the concrete form of the neighbour and the stranger. The ethic of holiness is based on the vision of creation-as-God’s-work-of-love. This vision sees all human beings – ourselves, our neighbour and the stranger – as in the image of God, and that is why we are to love our neighbour and the stranger as ourself.

I believe that there is something unique and contemporary about the ethic of holiness. It tells us that morality and ecology are closely related. They are both about creation: about the world as God’s work and humanity as God’s image. The integrity of humanity and the natural environment go together. The natural universe and humanity were both created by God, and we are charged to protect the first and love the second.

Shabbat Shalom

## NOTES

1. Shabbat 31a.
2. Harry Redner, *Ethical Life: The Past and Present of Ethical Cultures*, Roman and Littlefield, 2001, 49-68.
3. Genesis 18:19.
4. Hosea 2:19.
5. Jeremiah 9:23.
6. Mishnah Avot 3:14.



## The Value of Life

**Vayikra, 18:5:** “And you will guard My statutes and laws, that you will do them and you will live by them, I am HaShem.”

**Rashi, 18:5, Dh: And you will live by them:** “In the next World, because if you will say [it refers to] this world, his end is to die.”

The Torah tells us that if we will keep the Mitzvot, then we will ‘live by them’. Rashi explains that the Torah does not simply mean that we will live forever by them in this world, because everyone is destined to die. Rather, the Torah is referring to life in the only place that is eternal – the Next World. However, the Gemara derives a very different lesson from this verse. The Gemara<sup>1</sup> has a lengthy discussion about the source of the halacha that one is permitted, and obligated, to transgress any Mitzva, (with the exception of murder, Idol worship and immorality) in order to save a life. Shmuel states that the source is this verse where the Torah says, ‘you will live by them’ (*vechai bahem*). Shmuel explains that the Torah is coming to allude that one should live through his Mitzva observance and not die through keeping the Torah, hence one should not do a Mitzva that

could result in death. The Gemara concludes that Shmuel’s interpretation is the best one.

It is instructive to analyze the ramifications that ‘*vechai bahem*’ is the source of the obligation to break the Torah in order to save a life. One of the other suggested sources for the source of this obligation is a verse relating to the obligation to keep Shabbat: The Torah<sup>2</sup> tells us, “And the children of Israel will keep the Shabbat in order to keep the Shabbat throughout their generations.” Rebbe Shimon Ben Menasya interprets this verse to be instructing us to break one Shabbos to save a person’s life so that he will be able to observe many Shabbatot in the future. This derivation would seem to apply not just to Shabbat, but to all Mitzvot in general, whereby the Torah instructs us to break any Mitzva in order to potentially enable the sick person to keep other Mitzvos in the future.

The commentaries note that there is a very significant difference between this interpretation and that of Shmuel. According to Rebbe Shimon Ben Menasya, the reason that we break Shabbat is so that the sick person may be able to observe Shabbos in the future. It follows that in a case where it is totally certain that person will not be capable of surviving to keep another Shabbos then there is no permit to break Shabbos to save his life. In contrast, according to Shmuel’s drash that life is of more value than a Mitzvah, the permit and obligation to break a Mitzva to save a life would apply even if the sick person will definitely not be able to live long enough, or be well enough to perform any Mitzvos in the future. The Mishnah Berurah rules definitively that the halacha follows Shmuel, that we must break any Mitzva (excluding the three

aforementioned Mitzvot) in order to save a life. The reason for this is that life in and of itself is of intrinsic, infinite value, even if there would seem to be no practical benefit for lengthening the sick persons' life.

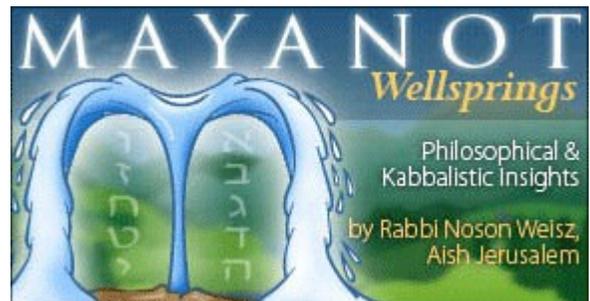
This idea has been particularly pertinent for the past several weeks, as the whole world has been struck with the worst pandemic in many decades, that has seen tens of thousands of deaths. It is at times like this when it is incumbent upon us to remember how precious the gift of life is and the great value of every moment of life. Life is full of challenges and there are times when a person can feel despondent – but if he remembers that life itself is cause for joy then he can overcome any negative feelings.

When the Alter of Novardok first started to build yeshivas, he was unsuccessful. He built yeshivas and they collapsed, he organized groups and they disintegrated. In addition, he and his approach were attacked by opponents. At that time, he came to Kelm and his Rebbi, The Alter of Kelm noticed he looked sad and understood why. That Motsei Shabbat when a group had gathered to hear his talk, he stood at the podium and remained silent for a very, very long time. Then he banged his hand on the shtender and thundered, “It is enough for a living being that he is alive.” Over and over he repeated his words until finally he told the group to pray Maariv. “That session” said the Alter of Novardok “dispelled my gloom and cleared my thoughts.”<sup>3</sup> The Alter of Kelm taught the Alter of Novardok a priceless lesson – as long as one is alive, there is nothing to complain about. May

we all merit to appreciate the gift of life and use it to its fullest.

**NOTES**

1. *Yoma, 85a-b.*
2. *Shemot, 31:16.*
3. Zaitchik, Sparks of Mussar, p.145-6.



**The Patterns of Life**

Parshat Kedoshim rounds out the Torah's treatment of sexual offences by listing the consequences of engaging in the various forbidden sexual relationships outlined in Parshat Acharei Mot.

One of the major hallmarks of a "modern society" is that it stays out of people's bedrooms. What goes on behind closed doors between consenting adults is no one else's concern. But we have gone way beyond the decision not to police sexual activity. Dedication to the promotion of human rights and respect for individual choice has influenced us to positively sanction relationships that were taboo not long ago, and even to extend legal recognition to unorthodox sexual arrangements. Same sex marriages are not an unusual phenomenon. We are no longer talking about events behind closed doors.

The Torah rules regarding sexual conduct are a stark contrast to all this. These rules go way beyond setting moral standards. This week's list of penalties, capital punishment in some cases, makes it clear that in a Torah society, the social machinery of the legal system must be fully enlisted in the enforcement of sexual norms. Clearly a Torah society does not practice the rule of minding your own business. This failure to respect the right to privacy coupled with the Torah's complete intolerance of homosexual acts is one of the major factors behind the rejection of Torah values by "modern thinkers."

Let us clearly state the 'modern' position so we know what we are responding to. The argument goes something like this:

1. There is no moral significance to the satisfaction of any physical urge.
2. If a heterosexual person can pursue the satisfaction of his or her sexual drive with society's approval, there is no reason why someone who is a homosexual should not enjoy the identical privilege.
3. The only moral principle involved in the expression of physical desires is the requirement of informed consent; we must never infringe on other people's rights in the pursuit of the satisfaction of our own desires.
4. Any attempt to interfere in other people's private sexual practices is a gross violation of the basic human right to privacy.

It follows that Biblical rules restricting the free expression of sexual preferences hark back to a more primitive era of human development.

Is there a way to present the position behind the Torah injunctions regarding sexual practices that modern people can relate to?

### **WHO ARE WE, REALLY?**

Obviously, our attitude towards sexual relationships is heavily influenced by our orientation towards our humanity in general. Logic dictates that the first step in comprehending Torah attitudes to sexual practices is to comprehend the Torah's view of the human being and how it differs from the secular modern view. As we shall see, the crux of the difference involves the proper understanding of the role played by "free will" in human development. The first question we must ask is, who are we, really?

The secular approach to understanding ourselves would have to be stated thus; we are the sum total of the drives and abilities that are programmed into our genetic package as modified by the environmental conditions of our developmental stage. In the language of science these stages are known as the genotype and phenotype respectively.

We are all familiar with the way this combination operates. All people are born with a mix of abilities and drives that is particular to them, and these are the potentials that they draw on and express in the course of their lives. As we are all born into particular families and social groups, and each such group has its own notions of the purpose of life and the activities that constitute civilized behavior, inevitably, some of our innate

abilities and drives will be encouraged and developed, while others will be discouraged and repressed on the grounds that they are counter-productive and antisocial.

The "unique" mixture of the heredity and the environment to which he or she was subjected determines the personality and attitudes of each human that reaches adulthood. The use of the word "unique" is fully justified in this context; in the entire history of the world, no two human beings have ever shared precisely the same heredity and environment. It is clear that the quality of individuality that separates each human being from all others is not a product of our choices. We have zero choice about our genetic package and precious little choice about the early environment that shapes our characters.

By the time we reach early adulthood, we have been shaped by these factors that were beyond our control or choice - we have been programmed with a set of attitudes and drives that constitute the furniture of our inner world. It is only at this point, after we have reached the adult stage of our lives that we are handed the reins that guide our destiny; nearly a third of our life is over by the time we finally assume control over our own future.

## **DIVERGENCE POINT**

It is at this point that the Torah's view of a human being begins to diverge from the secular one.

According to the Torah, this human being of early adulthood whom we have just described, unique though he may be, cannot be termed an individual in any meaningful sense. He or she is

still entirely a product of creation at this point. For it is God who designs each person's unique genetic package and it is Divine Providence that shapes the parameters of the early life that shapes everyone's character.

If an individual does nothing more than express the personality and actualize the attitudes he has acquired by the age of early adulthood, he or she may as well have never been born. Such a person can be viewed as human flotsam swept along by the current of the river of life that flows with God's energy, a totally inert being.

We have only to look at creation from God's point of view to appreciate the compelling logic of this. Why would God be interested in a wind-up toy that spins precisely according to the pattern He set into motion? Let us not forget that God is Omniscient! He does not have a problem seeing into the future. He has no need to run tests to determine how well the things He planned will actually perform. The logic is quite compelling. God must have put us down here to make our own choices. He gave us free will. He wants us to shape ourselves!

When we reach early adulthood, we are expected to examine the organism whose control we have assumed and correct its built in flaws. If we simply optimize the situations we encounter within the programmed responses of our given personalities there was no need to have actually lived. A calculating machine of Divine caliber could easily have figured out exactly what we would do with our lives. God expects more.

## DIVINE EXPECTATIONS

God expects us to analyze the world around us as adults, and reach some conclusions about the purpose of life. Then he expects us to employ our lives to express the conclusions we have reached through our deliberations. We are not to take either ourselves or the world as givens that we can do nothing about and go about adapting our selves to fit into it as best we can. Having reached a conclusion about the purpose of life it is our duty to employ our God given talents to reshape the world to conform with this purpose. We must change the world rather than fit into it.

In practice, changing the world means changing ourselves and influencing others to change themselves. The need to change compels the reorientation of our urges and desires. If, on reflection, their expression cannot be reconciled with the purpose of our lives we are expected to employ our capacity for free choice either to reshape them when that is possible or to restrain them entirely when it is not.

The reshaping of character is always difficult; the restraining of improper urges even more so. But a person who does not shape his life and control his desires, who merely actualizes his original character, accepting everything as a given never genuinely exercises his free will at all. In God's eyes, such a person does not exist as an individual at all, although he is no doubt a unique human package as pointed out above. For no matter how unique he may be, it was not he, but God who put together the package, and all such a human being does is to return the

original package at the end of his life somewhat the worse for wear.

The Gaon of Vilna taught that the purpose of our sojourn in this world is to reshape our characters to reflect the *'tzelem elokim'*, the image of God that each human being was created to be. (See "Even Shlema," Introduction.) The significance of each person having been designed as a unique package is that each of us has the ability to reflect God in his or her own unique way. The events of our lives are arranged for us so that we have an opportunity to wage the very battles with ourselves that we need to fight in order to perfect the image of God that only we can be.

## SATISFYING OUR BASIC URGES

Let us attempt to bring these ideas down to earth by presenting the sort of life with which we are much more familiar. Take sports for example.

Chances are fair that you, the reader, having grown up in the same cultural environment as I have, are into sports on some level. A good portion of the world's population tunes in annually to the Super Bowl. We all know perfectly intelligent people who get all worked up about their teams winning or losing. This applies to people who have never engaged in the sort of rough sport their teams play. An enormous amount of money and social resources are tied up in the professional organization of various sorts of games. Can we explain this?

The answer: we all have a built in urge to engage in fierce battle, to pursue adventures, to be the heroes who bring home the victory against enormous odds. Most of us are unable to express any of these urges in the context of

our daily lives either at home or in the work place. If these natural urges remain bottled up we become bored and frustrated. The solution: identify with a team that is engaged in some form of violent sport, and express these urges vicariously.

When our team battles to victory, we feel stimulated and intensely alive, as our own urge for battle, adventure and victory is satisfied by proxy. If we place a small bet on the game and have a real stake in the outcome, it intensifies our feeling of participation and involvement and sharpens our pleasure.

This also explains the violence and aggressive sex that are the major attractions of many books and movies. The urges and feelings that we are not able to actualize, but which constitute a part of our built in life force, can be safely expressed and enjoyed in these imaginary ways.

## **WHAT ABOUT THE POINT**

The rationale is pretty clear, but let us consider the rationale of the rationale. Why do we not see it as a waste of time to entertain ourselves with the sublimated expressions of our more violent desires? Once again we all know the answer. What other point is there to life than the expression of our urges and desires? As secular beings, what else do we have to live for?

It is only the expression and satisfaction of our basic urges and desires that gives us the feeling of being alive; it makes perfect sense to spend our lives in the pursuit of the expression of our basic drives - whether through fantasy or in actuality. Of course it is best to satisfy a desire in the world of actuality; but even the expression of desires that can be expressed only in fantasy

is vastly entertaining and worth the time and investment. It also gives you the feeling of being alive.

Once again we are dealing with the concept of the purpose of life but this time we are standing at the precipice of a great divide. If we take ourselves and the world as givens, life as a whole has no purpose. We are born, we have children and we die. They are born they will have children and they will also die. Each is a unique package, granted, but so what? The universe has produced this uniqueness and it will shortly fade back into the stellar dust.

But while life may not have a purpose it is still impossible to live a purposeless life! Everyone with the gift of human intelligence must do something meaningful with their time here on earth or they will go utterly mad. But what can we possibly accomplish if we are merely playing out who we are?

The answer; use your life to express yourself. After all each person is unique; no one else has the same given inputs and character traits as you do. If you spend your life expressing as many of them as you can without causing any injury to others you will have had as purposeful a life as it is possible to have under the circumstances.

In fact, given such an order of things, preventing a person from expressing a basic urge can almost be defined as a moral wrong. No one has the possibility to invest life with inherent purpose anyway; all that we can do is live purposefully. If I stop you from doing even that because I define your urges as somehow wrong I empty your life of meaning. This amounts to spiritual murder in

a sense. The expression of basic urges and characters is all we have to live for and therefore the satisfaction of an urge almost takes on the dimensions of a spiritual quest.

## PLEASURE AS A TOOL

The Torah's attitude to the satisfaction of physical urges is profoundly different; the appreciation of the difference lies at the heart of understanding our Torah portion.

The Torah teaches us to pursue holiness rather than sensation. Instead of becoming intensely involved and identifying with our urges, we must detach ourselves and learn to regard them as tools. The word *kadosh*, meaning "holiness", also means separation and detachment. Our urges are not who we are, but merely a part of our built in programs. As we have pointed out, the built in program is definitely not who we are; we are only the sum total of the things we accomplish through our own choices.

*"God spoke to Moses saying: Speak to the entire assembly of the Children of Israel and say to them: You shall be holy for I, the Lord, Your God am holy." (Leviticus 19:1-2)*

Rashi explains:

Separate yourselves from illicit sexual practices and from transgressions; wherever you find a barrier against sexual crimes you find holiness.

According to Jewish thought, God implanted our urges to enable us to accomplish the things we must do as human beings effectively. Our urge for adventure is the engine that drives us to experiment with new ideas; our desire for victory

helps us tackle an unresponsive universe and bend it to our will.

Our basic desires are all tools we can harness in the pursuit of perfection. They constitute the engine that powers the human machine in the pursuit of the goals that our minds judge to be worthy of pursuit. Our urges are not there to be exploited or to provide gratification; they are there to be harnessed. They are means, not ends.

The drive for sexual gratification is perhaps the most powerful of all our urges. Even the most superficial glance around our culture amply attests to the great drawing power of this urge. It is the basic tool of all advertisement. We cannot even sell Coca Cola without the help of scantily clad young people with perfect figures who look like they are having the time of their lives drinking Coke. The pursuit of romance is the most common topic that all cultural phenomena address, whether it be plays, movies, books, songs or television programs. If you subtracted all the cultural phenomena that surround this single human urge, most of the trappings of our world would simply vanish.

This is hardly surprising. We human beings are obsessed with life and living, and the sexual urge is the fundamental expression of the life force.

## THE QUEST FOR LIFE

We have now reached the crux of this essay. The Torah is also concerned with the pursuit of life.

*"I call heaven and earth today to bear witness against you: I have placed life*

*and death before you, blessing and curse. Choose life, so that you will live, you and your offspring - to love the Lord your God, to listen to His voice and to cleave to Him, for He is your life and the length of your days ..."* (Deut. 30:19-20)

*"But you who cling to the Lord your God - you are all alive today."* (Deut. 4:)

The point of separation between Torah culture and secular culture is not over the value of life. Life is the supreme value in both systems. The point to ponder is the nature of life: What is life? Where does it come from?

A Roman noblewoman asked Rabbi Yosi ben Chalafta: "In how many days did God create the world?" He answered her, "In six days, as it is written, *for in six days God made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them* (Exodus 20:11)." She asked, "And what does He do each day since then?" The Rabbi answered, "He arranges matches between couples, and makes this one wealthy and this one poor." She said, "I can also do that! I have many male and female slaves. I will pair them tonight. What He has been doing since creation, I can do in a few minutes." The Rabbi said, "What seems so easy in your eyes is as difficult in the eyes of God as the splitting of the sea, as it is written, *God settles the solitary into a family, He releases those bound in fetters* (Psalms 68:7)."

At this point Rabbi Yosi took his leave and departed. The woman went and lined up a thousand male slaves opposite a thousand female slaves and ordered that so and so should marry such and such. She matched them all in a single night. The next day they came before her: one had a scratch in his eye, another a gash in his head a third a broken foot. This one declared, 'I don't want to live with her', and the other one stated, 'I cannot live with him'.

She summoned Rabbi Yosi and declared, "I am ready to testify that your God is true and the Torah is true, and whatever you told me was well spoken." He told her, "God pairs them against their will and it still works. He ties a collar on this one at one end of the earth and mates him with that one at the other end of the earth, as it is written: *God settles the solitary into a family, He releases those bound in fetters*. The significance of the fetters is that the one who is unhappy cries and the one who is happy breaks out in song [but they both submit to God's arrangements]. (Tanchuma, Ki Tisa, 5)

While every act of intimacy makes the corpuscles race through the blood stream and brings with it some gratification and a surge of life, this is all physical. As physical beings, we begin to die the moment we are born. The pursuit of the satisfaction of the physical urge is not to be confused with the pursuit of life. The Torah considers such a pursuit the dance of death.

Life is the joining of body to spirit, of attaining a connection to the soul and to God. Not all sexual unions connect one to the soul. It takes God - who knows the spiritual input required by the world at any particular time - to figure out which sort of union is capable of producing the right sort of spiritual connection. He considers this such as important an endeavor as the six days of creation. It rivals the creation process in its complexity and importance.

The creation of life is the true business of human beings. We are placed in the world to choose life so that 'we might live, we and our offspring'. Our sexual urge is the tool that we were given to ensure that we do not ignore this most important of our human tasks. But the urge is a tool, nothing more. Its satisfaction is not the end but the means.

As always, it is our own actions that inspire Divine intervention in our lives. As the Nefesh Hachaim [Gate 1] points out:

*"God is your Guardian, your protective shadow at your right hand."  
(Psalms 121:5)*

God acts as a shadow that copies the reactions of the one who casts it. If we smile then so does He. If we connect to Him through our actions, He is there at our right hand as our Guardian.

The Torah teaches us how to partake of the physical world and at the same time separate ourselves from the purely physical and connect ourselves to the spiritual in all our physical endeavors. As the pursuit of the life force is our most powerful urge and, therefore, our most obsessive occupation as a species, the connection of the life force itself to spirituality is

the most important connection that we ever make in the course of our lives. It is the proper pursuit of the life force itself that holds the key to holiness and allows us to transcend physicality. It is to guide us properly in this area that the laws of sexual relations are written in the Torah.

It is perfectly true that in terms of the mere satisfaction of a physical urge, there is no real difference in how one goes about it, as long as it injures no one. But as usual, a lot more is at stake.

As Jews we must pursue true life. We must not spend our days in the pursuit of physical sensations that temporarily distract us from the certain knowledge of our imminent demise.

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