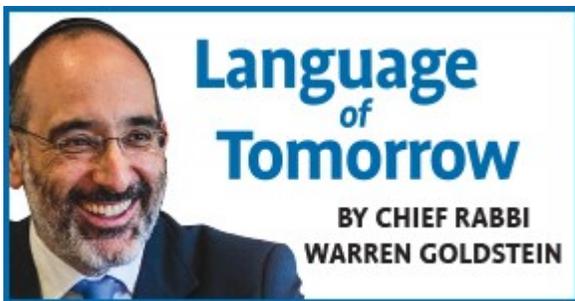


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Is Self-Interest Incompatible with Altruism?

From the moment of our birth, we clamour for our wants and needs, and we spend the rest of our lives pursuing them. Clearly, God has hard-wired self-interest deep into the human psyche, so it's certainly not something we view as necessarily evil. On the contrary, halacha – Jewish law – explicitly reflects this. The Talmud sets out the following scenario: two people are walking in the desert, and one of them has a flask of water. There's only enough water for one of them to make it to civilisation; if they share the water, they will die. The great Talmudic sage, Rabbi Akiva, rules that in such a case, "your life comes first"; the one who has the water drinks it. Survival of the self comes first.

At the same time, while self-interest is a powerful and unshakeable force of human nature, it can also be extremely destructive. Even self-destructive. As the Mishna in Pirkei Avot says: "Jealousy, physical desires and the pursuit of honour remove a person from this world."

Jealousy, desire and honour are all selfcentred forces within a person, and the Mishna is saying that a person who is selfcentred ultimately brings destruction on himself. God has created the world in such a way that when a person blindly pursues selfgratification, he paradoxically does grave harm to himself. Those who are consumed with jealousy, with the pursuit of their physical desires, with acquiring honour and recognition from others at all costs, find no peace of mind and are drawn to act in ways that harm not just the people they perceive to be standing in their way – they harm themselves too.

It goes beyond that, to our ultimate calling in this world, which is a calling towards holiness. This week's parsha, Kedoshim, opens with a clarion call to the Jewish people: "You shall be holy, for I, Hashem your God, am holy." (Vayikra 19:2) What is this call to holiness? What does it mean to be holy? And what does it mean that God is holy?

Rabbi Shimon Shkop, one of the great Lithuanian sages of the pre-war years, has a fascinating explanation. He says God's essential "characteristic", as far as we can talk about such things, is His pure goodness and kindness. God is completely self-sufficient; He needs nothing, nor does He receive anything, and everything He does is therefore an act of pure,

unreciprocated kindness – from the creation of the universe to taking care of our smallest needs, and the needs of the smallest and seemingly most insignificant of creatures. This selfless giving is how Rabbi Shkop defines holiness, and it is this we are called on to emulate so that we, too, can become holy.

It's a beautiful idea, but the Midrash gives us pause for thought, saying God reaches a level of holiness that no human being can. Rabbi Shkop explains the Midrash: no human being can ever attain this ideal like God, because we have been created with an intrinsic love of and concern for the self, which will always factor into the equation.

So, we have a dilemma: how do we attain holiness – defined as acting purely selflessly – when we are unable to do so? How do we reconcile the conflicting ideals of selfinterest and pure giving?

Rabbi Shkop has an answer that is deep and beautiful. If the self is getting in the way of helping others, then we need to expand our definition of the self.

When we refer to “I”, who are we talking about? Who or what is contained in our definition of self? Rabbi Shkop explains that a lowly, coarse person sees himself, defines his “I”, as purely a physical body. Someone slightly more elevated sees his soul as part of his self-identity. At a higher level, one’s identity encompasses one’s spouse and children, and then one’s community, and so it goes. An even greater person includes the entire Jewish people in his sense of “I”, and even beyond that – the entire world. The more

spiritually elevated a person, the more people included in that person’s sense of “I”.

So the call to holiness is not about selfdenial. It is a call to become a greater person by expanding the definition of “self”, and in so doing, unleashing the powerful force of giving and kindness to so many more people, and in a much richer, more fulfilling, far holier way.

Of course, it’s not so easy; it is, indeed, a lifelong journey. Initially, life is only about meeting our own needs. Then we graduate from this survivalist state of being; we marry and start a family, assuming greater responsibility, expanding our definition of self to encompass others. And we continue expanding our world, taking on responsibility for our community, for those around us, for the Jewish people as a whole, and even for the entire world. It’s a cosmic journey of selfdiscovery and self-transformation whose destination is the soul’s perfection and its ultimate expression.

Essentially, the more we reach out to others, the greater we become. This is why, when a child is born, we pray: “May this katan” – this small one, “become gadol” – become big. We pray for this infant, so naturally preoccupied with meeting its immediate physical needs, to become an adult in the fullest sense of the word, to become someone who sees the people around him, really sees them, and has an expansive perspective of the world, and an expansive definition of self.

This worldview touches on so much of Judaism. There are many mitzvot of chessed (loving kindness): comforting mourners, visiting the sick, burying the dead, tzedakah – helping those in

need. So much of the Torah is about reaching out to others, about taking responsibility for community and making the world a better place.

On a personal level, it is also about building family. The act of constituting a marriage is termed by our sages as kiddushin, which comes from the Hebrew word kedusha, meaning holiness. In what way is marriage an act of holiness? Creating a marriage should be the ultimate act of giving to another. By defining marriage as an act of holiness, our sages are teaching us that marriage is all about selfless giving, and that the creation of a family is all about expanding the concept of “self” and reaching out to others; transcending the self to becoming a greater person.

When fulfilling each other is a priority for husband and wife, other desires and preferences become subordinate. By putting our own needs aside, we don't feel that we are sacrificing anything.

Essentially, then, through marriage a person expands his definition of self and demonstrates that his life is not only about his own immediate, personal, selfish needs, but rather the needs of another human being, to constitute a broader, greater human being. As it says in the book of Bereishit, when God gave direction for the very first marriage in history between Adam and Eve, He said: “Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother and cleave to his wife and they shall become one flesh.” (2:24)

Marriage is about two people becoming one, a process of transcending the self and evolving to become a greater being. And that is why the bringing together of Adam and Eve is prefaced

with the words: “It is not good for a person to be alone.” It is not good for us to be limited, when this expanded definition of the self, this broadmindedness, this human greatness and holiness is ours for the taking. That definition of self is further expanded as children are born.

Life is a journey towards holiness, a journey towards expanding the self and achieving the greatness that God knows we are capable of.



The Family Parsha
By Nesanel Yoel Safran
Lessons, stories and discussion questions for parents and kids

Appreciating Our Elders

When we're young, we can feel like we don't have much in common with older people, and maybe not much to learn from them either. But in this week's portion, God teaches us that older people deserve our attention - and our respect. They have a lot of life wisdom, and give us a connection to what were in many ways the greater days of the past.

In our story, we meet a kid who gets a new perspective on old age.

"SOMETHING OLD, SOMETHING NEW"

I felt both guilty and relieved as I watched my parents begin to pack up our minivan. They were getting ready to visit Grandpa later in the afternoon at the old age home. As usual they wanted me to go along, but this time I told them I

wasn't coming with them. My parents were disappointed, and I knew Grandpa would be too, but I just couldn't do it this time. I hated to admit it, but I just found old people so, you know, boring. I like things new and exciting, lots of action. And let's face it - old people are not like that at all. Besides, I had big plans. There was a special hi-tech exhibit at the science museum - talk about new and exciting - and my buddies and I had planned to go check it out. They had the latest computer equipment on display, and there was even supposed to be a robot that could clean a whole room - I could sure use one of those.

I got there first and waited for the other guys to show up. After a few minutes, something unusual caught my eye. It seemed like some celebrity or something arrived, because there was this old man being followed around by about a whole bunch of kids who couldn't do enough for him. One kid brought him a drink, another was carrying his coat, someone else brought him a chair, and even brushed it off before he sat down!

'He must be really big,' I thought. Maybe he's a famous actor or some billionaire sports team owner. My pals hadn't shown up, so I figured I'd move closer and try to get a piece of the action.

As I got closer, I could see that the kids were from the local Torah School. I nudged up to one of them, and whispered, "Who is he?"

I guess I didn't speak clearly, because the kid gave me a funny look, and said, "I'm sorry - I don't know what you mean."

I explained, "I can see from the way you're all fawning over this old man that he must be

someone important, like, you know, a celebrity. So who is he?"

The kid nodded his head, and I thought he was trying to cover up a smile. "Well, you're right," he said, "He's someone very important, but not like you think. He's our great grandfather and almost 90 years old."

I didn't get it, and I guess the kid could tell because he went on to explain. "You see we learned in our school how important it is to show respect for older people."

"Why?"

"Well first of all, anyone who has lived so long has seen and done a lot, and picked up a lot of life wisdom along the way. When I hear an older person tell a story about what life was like when he was our age, I feel like I'm getting a living history class. But more than that, we learned that the way God designed the world is that in each generation you go back, people were greater and wiser."

"But we have so many new things today that they didn't," I objected.

"Maybe they didn't have all the high-tech we do," he said, pointing toward the exhibit, "but they didn't need it - their brains were already high-tech. So when we get a chance to be with an elderly person, we do all we can to show him respect, and learn from him. Get it?"

Meanwhile the old man had started to get up from his rest and move on, so the kid apologized to me, and jumped up to follow him. I thought about what he said. I had never looked at it that way, but I had to admit, the kid made sense.

Maybe old people did deserve more respect than they get.

I watched the 'great grandfather' make his way down the aisle, surrounded by his admirers, and thought about my own lonely Grandpa, and how I wasn't even making him important enough in my life to pay an occasional visit.

"Hey Jay, where have you been hiding?" called out one of my buddies from across the museum lobby. "C'mon, let's go and check out all the great new stuff."

"Sorry," I said. "Something's come up and I have to catch my parents before they leave. I've gotta go with them to see someone who may not be new - but is definitely great."

Ages 3-5

Q. How did Jay feel at first about older people?

A. He felt like they weren't interesting, and he didn't want to spend time with them.

Q. How did he feel after talking to the kid in the museum?

A. He realized that older people have a lot of wisdom, and deserve our respect and attention.

Ages 6-9

Q. Why is it important to show respect to the elderly?

A. First and foremost, it's the right thing to do - God told us so. Besides this, they deserve it. They have lived through a lot, overcome many challenges and gained valuable life experience. They are a link to our past and the keepers of our traditions. We can save ourselves from making a lot of mistakes by listening to what they have to say. When we connect with older

people, we are doing ourselves an even bigger favor than we are doing them.

Q. How do you explain why the kids at the museum were treating their great grandfather differently than the way Jay was treating his?

A. It all has to do with the way they were looking at things. Jay saw his grandfather as a burden, someone who merely took up his valuable time and prevented him from being with his friends. The kids in the museum realized that older people have a lot of experience and wisdom that younger people generally lack, and saw their great grandfather as someone they could learn from and was worthy of their greatest respect.

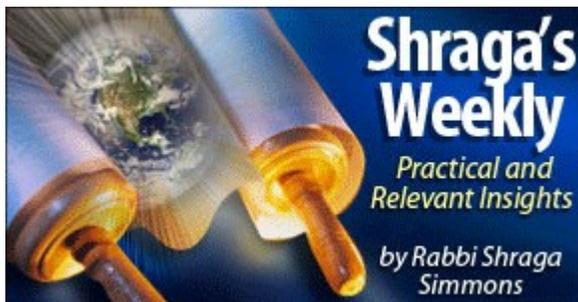
Ages 10 and Up

Q. Would you say that the world is becoming more or less advanced as time goes on?

A. It depends. In certain ways, such as material comfort, and technology, we are way above past generations, yet spiritually and intellectually, we are at a far lower level than our predecessors. When one studies the Torah and its commentaries, and reads the original writings of great people from decades, centuries, and even millennia ago, he becomes awed with their depth of thought, sensitivity of spirit, and encyclopedic knowledge, each generation freely admitting that the previous ones were even greater than they. One gets an inkling of this when meeting with great Torah scholars of today, whose lives spanned the previous generation as well. Or, to paraphrase a recent Torah leader: when you see each previous generation as being one step closer to great spiritual giants, rather than one step closer to apes, you start to see your grandparents from a different perspective.

Q. But if they were so much wiser than we, how is it that we have invented more?

A. If you substitute the word discover for invent, the answer becomes clearer. All of the secrets of the physical world are known to God since He made them. He chooses, according to His plan, when it is appropriate to make them known to humankind. Besides this, we have a tradition that our sages were able to accomplish many things by spiritual means, for which today we need physical 'inventions.' It could simply be that they were content with their lives - rich in spiritual content as they were, and simply didn't feel a need to devise ways to make themselves more comfortable.



Too Close for Comfort

This week's Parsha begins with the tragic deaths of Aaron's two sons, Nadav and Avihu.

The Torah says that "*fire consumed them*" (Leviticus 10:2), and then says they were removed from the camp with their clothes still intact (10:5). How did their clothes survive a fire that killed them? Rashi explains: They were electrocuted by two lightning bolts which shot out from the Holy of Holies and split through their nostrils.

To suffer such a fate, they must have done something really really awful. What was it?

After waiting months for the inauguration of the Tabernacle, Nadav and Avihu were so anxious to get close to God that they took incense-pans and rushed headlong into the Holy of Holies.

The problem is that the Holy of Holies is an environment which only tolerates entry on one day of the year – Yom Kippur, and by one person – the *Kohen Gadol* (high priest).

In the pure spiritual center of the Tabernacle, Nadav and Avihu had entered an environment for which their wiring could not sustain – and they vaporized.

The Torah calls Nadav and Avihu "*those close to me*" (Leviticus 10:3). They had positive intentions – to get close, to unite, to connect. Of course God wants closeness. But there are appropriate boundaries. Nadav and Avihu crossed the line ... and were subsumed.

For the Sake of Others

This incident teaches the need for fences and boundaries in our own relationships. Because there's a fine line between the desire to get close, and something unhealthy.

The Talmud makes the following intriguing statement: "Even more than the baby calf wants to drink, the mother wants to nurse." The simple explanation is that of course the calf is hungry and needs to eat, but even more so the mother is full of milk and needs to get it out.

I heard in the name of Rabbi Simcha Wasserman that this teaching must be understood differently. Because if the mother's only concern was to get rid of her milk, then it would come out in one big gush. And we see instead that it comes out precisely in the right

proportion to satisfy the specific needs of the calf. So when the Talmud says, "More than the baby calf wants to drink, the mother wants to nurse," it is saying that even more than the calf desires to eat, the mother wants it to eat – not for the mother's sake, but because that's what's best for the calf!

That's what a good relationship is all about: close, giving, concerned. But not over-bearing. Not smothering. The Kabbalists explain this by way of metaphor: If my candle is lit, and another's is not, then it is a great kindness to use my candle to light the other. But then once the second candle is lit, the real kindness is to back off, to take my candle away and let the other candle burn on its own.

The role of parenting (or any education) is to bring the student to a point of independence. Thus Maimonides writes that the highest level of charity is to create financial independence – by giving a gift, a loan, or a job.

The dependent relationship is an unhealthy one; it is "too close for comfort."

Open Door Policy

The Talmud (Avot 5:13) describes different people by the way they share their possessions. One type has a completely open policy with others, saying "What's mine is yours, and what's yours is mine."

The Talmud says this person is an ignoramus.

Why? Because this set-up is chaos. Yours, mine. Nobody has anything at all.

Let's say a person wants to make their home an "Open House" where anyone is free to come

and go as they please. Sounds great? Not really, because that person has no basis to give anymore. If you invite me, then it's meaningless – since anyone can come it's not really your house, and it's not me you're inviting!

There is no distance, no boundaries between individuals. Is it any wonder that Communism failed.

Splitting a Piece

In describing God's Covenant with the Jewish people, the Torah uses the expression, "*Karet Brit*" (see Exodus 34:10, Deut. 29:13). The literal meaning – "to cut a covenant" – is an oxymoron. "Cut" implies a separation, whereas covenant implies a joining together!

The Maharal explains that the way to get close to someone is not to give up everything, but rather to "cut" from yourself a special part, and share it with the other person. That way, you will always want to stay close to that person, because they share such an intimate part of you. Yet at the same time you preserve your own individuality.

It's all a matter of knowing where to set the boundary. If we place boundaries wisely, we can achieve proper closeness with everyone. We may find it appropriate to confide with a colleague about personal finances, talk to the rabbi about religion, and a neighbor about politics. But unrestrained closeness with everyone is a recipe for personal disaster.

This applies to physical intimacy also. We must set boundaries clearly and objectively, so that in the heat of passion we don't cross an unhealthy boundary. This is one reason why the Torah

speaks against promiscuity, or even against "social hugging" between members of the opposite sex. Because if I'm doing it with everyone, then what's left for my spouse?!

The Jewish Test

Before God gave the Torah at Mount Sinai, He commanded Moses to set up a boundary around the mountain, lest the people come too close. This instruction is so important that it is repeated in Exodus 19:12, 19:21 and 19:24.

"Getting too close" has been a Jewish test throughout the ages. We have such drive and desire to reach out, to fix the world, to bring peace and to usher in the Messianic era. With this intensity, we sometimes rush in with the right intentions – but in the wrong direction.

Success in life is dependent on knowing where we're headed and how far to go. Our drives have to be harnessed in the proper amount, and in the right place and time. Perhaps this is the reason that Jerusalem – the holiest of all Jewish sites – is a "walled" city.

Ignoring this was the fatal mistake of Nadav and Avihu.



The Weakness of Playing to One's Strengths

When growing up, children are often taught to seek out their strengths and play to them. Within any given team, each member is assigned a specific role that taps into the unique strengths that they bring to the table. In that manner, the team as a whole achieves a sense of balance. Each member complements the others and compensates for the weaknesses of others, and ideally this creates a situation where each individual's skills are utilised optimally.

When in a group context – a sports team, a classroom, a department at work or a community – it is natural and widely accepted that each person brings their own unique set of skills and has their weaknesses balanced out by the other team or community members. When it comes to our internal personal skill set however, is it enough for our internal strengths to compensate for our personal weaknesses? Can we simply accept the status quo? After all, these were the 'ingredients' with which we were created. Or, should there instead be a path of introspection and personal growth aimed at rectifying our weaknesses? Should we be embarking on an internal battle with the aim of refining ourselves and achieving a more complete state of being?

At the outset of *Parashat Kedoshim*, we are instructed that: 'Each man shall revere his mother and father' (*Lev. 19:3*). The Talmud highlights the fact that the mother is placed before the father because our automatic inclination, when it comes to reverence and fear, is traditionally towards the father, while the maternal connection naturally leans towards a more loving relationship (Talmud Bavli, Tractate *Kiddushin* 30b-31a). In the Ten Commandments, however, we are commanded: 'Respect your father and your mother' (*Deut. 5:16*). In this case, the father is placed before the mother, for our natural inclination is to respect and feel devotion towards our mothers, due to the tender affection, or 'motherly love', that they customarily show. Fathers, in contrast, stereotypically command more of a sense of awe. The message here is simple. Whilst we may feel a default sentiment towards each parent, we are commanded to overcome the default, to balance our proclivity and to honour and fear them both equally.

Perhaps in the individual realm too, we should be working towards overcoming the default set of character traits we were born with. It is true that each person possesses unique talents that point them towards fulfilling their specific mission here on earth. However, we should not fall prey to simply accepting our apparently 'natural state'. Indeed, we may have been born within a certain context or possess particular tendencies that incline us towards one type of behaviour or another, but we must not allow these to define our destiny. As stated by the Rambam:

Do not allow yourself to consider that which fools of other nations say, that

at the time of a man's creation, the Holy One, Blessed Be He, decrees whether he will be righteous or wicked. This is untrue. Each person is capable of being righteous like Moses our teacher, or wicked like Jeroboam. Similarly, he may be wise or foolish, merciful or cruel, miserly or generous, or acquire any other character trait. There is no one who compels him, sentences him or leads him towards either of these two paths. Rather, he, on his own initiative and free will, chooses the path that he will follow (Rambam, *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Repentance, 5:2).

This is a key distinction between a team and an individual. With teams, whether in family, business or sport, each individual complements and compensates for the rest of the group. One member's strengths accommodate for another's weaknesses and vice versa, which can lead to the whole really becoming greater than the sum of its parts. In the individual realm, however, it is different, 'If I am not for myself, who is for me?' (Mishna, Tractate *Avot* 1:14). As individuals, we must seek out avenues for compensating for our flaws in order to achieve a sense of balance. Traits like anger or pessimism need to be actively worked on in order to even out the flaws and improve our one-man team.

Through the subtle placement of the words 'mother' and 'father' in the context of honouring and revering one's parents, the Torah alludes to the fact that accepting the status quo is not enough. Rather, we must always strive to find comfort specifically outside of our comfort zone, to transform our weaknesses into strengths and

our seemingly fixed fate into a transcendental destiny.

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