

# The Jewish Ethics Workbook: Chapter One

## Defining Moments

*Beloved is man, for he was created in the image of God; still greater was this love in that it was made known to him that he was created in the image of God.  
(Avot: Chapter 3, Mishnah 14)*

Aaron was proud of the fact that he had earned his Commercial Drivers License. He had worked hard all spring to pass his driving test, and the special drivers license allowed him to take a job at a Jewish summer camp for mentally and physically disabled children and adults. He was especially excited because this was his first real job. Among his many responsibilities, Aaron was in charge of transporting disabled campers to and from the camp.

It was a great summer job. It paid well, and Aaron enjoyed a real sense of satisfaction from knowing that he was helping out the campers in a tangible way. Some days were more hectic than others; extra pickups, trips to the hospital and pharmacy, and even a trip to a wheel chair repair shop.

Fridays were always the busiest day of the week. When he finally got back to the camp late on Friday afternoons, Aaron barely had time to shave, shower, and dress before Shabbat started.

One Friday was particularly crazy because the other driver at the camp took the day off. Finally, after trips to the infirmary, the hospital, and the post office, Aaron returned back to camp with about thirty minutes to spare before the evening prayer services were starting. Just as he was about to step into the shower though, Aaron's beeper went off. He was needed immediately

in the kitchen. The camp director's wife, Sheila, who was in charge of the kitchen, asked Aaron if he could do one more quick errand. She needed some rice cakes and wanted Aaron to drive back to town and pick some up in the local supermarket. Aaron protested that he didn't have enough time to drive back and forth to town before Shabbat started. Sheila glared back at Aaron and said that she really didn't care if he was late or not. She needed the rice cakes, and she needed them now!

Aaron went straight to the camp director's office and told him what Sheila had said. The director, of course, sided with his wife, and in a loud and angry voice, and in a tone Aaron had never heard him use before, ordered Aaron to do as he was told or else.

Aaron panicked. He didn't want to upset the camp director any more than he already had, and he certainly didn't want to lose his job over a few rice cakes. After just a moment's hesitation, Aaron ran back to the van and drove into town as fast as he could.

Aaron *was* late for Shabbat that week. As he tells it, "In the end, in order not to upset my boss, I had to sacrifice my values and Jewish law."

In retrospect, Aaron realized that he had failed big time. As hard as it would have been, it really had been within his power to say no to his boss and his wife. "All is foreseen; yet free choice is granted" (Pirkei Avot: Chapter 3, Mishnah 15). In analyzing his own situation, Aaron now says:

In later weeks, after thinking over what had occurred, I still was unsettled about the situation. Basically, I came to the conclusion that I violated the laws of Shabbat in order to please my boss; but ultimately all I ended up doing was disappointing myself. I failed my personal convictions and religious values. *When the going got tough, I gave in and*

*compromised my beliefs.*

What went wrong for Aaron? Why did he violate his own “personal convictions and religious values”? After all, Aaron had attended good Jewish schools all of his life. He identified strongly with his Jewish heritage, and in part, his love of Judaism and his fellow Jews was one of the main reasons that had made this camp job so attractive to him in the first place. Aaron had never broken the laws of Shabbat before. So, why this time?

What makes Aaron’s dilemma so important was not that he’s a “bad” kid. Just the opposite. Aaron’s a good kid. In fact, he’s a lot like the rest of us. He’s hard-working, conscientious, funny, smart, concerned about his community and doing the right thing, and he always wants to please everyone.

I think with a little reflection all of us can come up with situations that we have faced similar to Aaron’s. They may not involve Shabbat, but they do make us question why we acted the way we did. Why did I cheat on that exam? Why didn’t I stop my friends from making fun of a classmate? Why did I drive in a such a reckless and dangerous way? The list could easily be multiplied, but you get the point.

### **Mitigating Factors: The Case for the Defense**

There are obviously many mitigating factors in Aaron’s case. Let’s suppose that you are hired as his defense attorney. What might you argue to the court in Aaron’s favor? Remember, do a good job because the next time it may be you who is on the defense.

*Number one:* Fridays were always tough for Aaron and this Friday was particularly tough

because his fellow driver didn't show up. Aaron was exhausted and worn out. He couldn't think clearly.

*Number two:* Aaron's boss, the camp director had told him to do what he was told "or else." Even without being able to think clearly, Aaron could certainly figure out that "or else" implied that failure to pick up the rice cakes would mean that he would lose his job.

*Number three:* Aaron was scared. This was the first time the camp director had ever yelled at him in this way. This was his first real job and a yelling boss can be a traumatic event.

*Number four:* Aaron had very little time to think about his decision. As he himself says, he "panicked."

*Number five:* Under the circumstances, Aaron did the best he could. He drove into town and back as fast as he could. He didn't stick around and personally benefit in anyway from his trip into town.

*Number six:* It was really the camp director's and his wife's fault. They were the ones who ordered him to go. If anyone should be on trial here, it's them and not poor Aaron. He was just following orders.

To summarize the case for Aaron then: He couldn't think clearly, he didn't want to lose his first job, he was traumatized, and on top of all this, he panicked. Even so, he did the best that he could do under the extreme circumstances, and, in any event, the camp director and his wife are the one's who really deserve the blame.

### **Yes, But...**

To all of this, I think an impartial judge might answer as follows: While the defense does contain

a kernel of truth, the fact remains that in the end, Aaron's decision to drive into town and break the laws of Shabbat was still his own. Wasn't it?

I don't think that Aaron, or any of us, would want it any other way. After all, it is only through the ability to choose for ourselves that we can express our own values, our own principles, and our own identities. It is through our choices and actions that we bring our most cherished values to life. If we let others choose for us, as Aaron did in this case, it is their values that are becoming concrete and real in the world and not ours. To the extent that we allow the Sheilas of this world to control our behavior, rice cakes really do become more important than Shabbat, if just for a few moments.

If we let Aaron off the hook here, he was merely a victim of his circumstances, aren't we really diminishing him (and ourselves) even further? If Aaron wants to observe the laws of Shabbat, this is a decision that he will have to make over and over again throughout his life. This was his *first* test and not his *last*.

### **Defining Ourselves to Ourselves**

One of the most important and unique characteristics of being human is our ability to define ourselves. This is how we create and build meaning in the world. Animals can't do this; plants can't do this; rocks can't do this. Even computers— *that have been able to mimic many human abilities like playing chess and writing music* – still can't define themselves. In a very real sense, our ability to state who we are through our choices and actions is what makes us human.

A defining moment is an opportunity to reveal, test, and shape one's character. In the case at hand, Aaron considered it a defining moment. He was not happy with what this situation

revealed about his character. He felt strongly that if this was indeed a test, then, on this occasion, he failed miserably.

Aaron, however, is not making the common mistake of wallowing in his past errors. It's so easy to think, "I blew it once, I'll probably blow it again." Rather, Aaron is choosing to use this defining moment as a positive opportunity. He wants to use what he has learned about himself from this experience to shape a better and more meaningful future.

"Beloved is man, for he was created in the image of God; still greater was this love in that it was made known to him that he was created in the image of God" (Avot: Chapter 3, Mishnah 14). What does it mean to be created in the image of God? According to Maimonides, it means that we have an ability choose "rationally." While philosophers continue to debate exactly what rationality is, I think it's fair to say that it at least implies that man is endowed with freedom of choice.

What I find so remarkable about Rabbi Akiva's insight quoted above from the Mishnah is that it may very well be the case that we have this freedom of choice, but we're not consciously aware of it. Aaron had freedom of choice all along, he just didn't know it. It was this dramatic episode that helped Aaron come to realize what the gift of growing up is all about. Aaron says:

I was able to learn and grow from this situation. I saw how much my religion means to me, and that I should trust myself if a similar situation arises in the future. I realized that a job is not more important than religion...I have to prioritize what is most important to me. When I look back over my life, I doubt I am going to think, "It was a good thing I went to get those rice cakes" or "Hey it's ok to violate the laws of Shabbat once." Rather I am going to be able to look back and see what I was able to learn from this situation.

In fact, not long after this incident at the camp occurred, Aaron was faced with a similar dilemma. He was scheduled to have a call-back interview for an entry-level position with a world-renown investment bank. The good news was that a call-back interview at this bank usually meant you were going to get the job. The interview was scheduled for lunch on a Friday during the fall. Aaron was assured by the Human Resources Department that the interview would be over by 2:00 PM. This would give him plenty of time to make it home for Shabbat.

Unfortunately, the person that was supposed to interview Aaron was running over an hour late. As Shabbat was now fast approaching, Aaron grew more and more agitated. This time, however, rather than passively going with the flow as he had done just a few months before, Aaron exercised his ability to choose and demonstrated his true loyalties. “At that point, I politely said to the interviewer that I am a Sabbath observer and I apologize, but I must make the 3:00 PM train in order to arrive home prior to the start of the Sabbath.”

There was a lot more at stake this time than just a summer job. This time Aaron’s “career was on the line”, but he didn’t hesitate. “I would like to think that the people at the bank respected me for my beliefs and hopefully will ultimately hire me for my abilities with the understanding that I will work as many hours as necessary, but not on Shabbat.”

Truth be told, Aaron’s story is not one of heroic leadership. He didn’t put his life on the line to save his buddies in war time. He didn’t even get the choice right the first time! And, even though it may have seemed to Aaron that his entire career was in jeopardy, if he doesn’t get this investment bank job (as of this writing he still doesn’t know whether or not he’s lost the job or not), another one will surely come along. Rather this story is a routine and everyday one.

But ironically, I think that's precisely what makes it so important and special. A defining moment is not a once in a lifetime opportunity that we either seize or lose. A defining moment is a moment in time that we consciously choose to bracket off from the everyday, to examine, and to infuse with meaning and purpose. It is a moment in which we experience integrity and connection through reasonable choice and mindful action. It is undoubtedly true as Pirkei Avot teaches us that "one *mitzvah* causes another *mitzvah*, and one transgression causes another transgression" (Chapter 4, Mishnah 2), but for somebody like Aaron who has made a mistake in the past, thinking that our behavior can never be changed can be a dangerous idea. With careful effort, a negative cycle can be broken.

This is exactly what Aaron is now learning:

I believe that the experience I had as a driver taught me the value of my personal beliefs and convictions. I learned from the dilemma to be more confident in my approach to resolving a situation. This approach I believe includes openness, awareness and proper planning.

These three characteristics, "openness, awareness, and proper planning," are some of the important building blocks that provide the foundation for living an ethical life. No one is born with the kind of openness, awareness, and foresight that Aaron is talking about. One *can* cultivate and grow these characteristics, though. But it is constant, hard, and painstaking work.

## **Conclusion**

Joseph Badaracco, a business ethics professor at Harvard University, begins his recent book, **Leading Quietly**, by noting that "Most people, most of the time, are neither saving the world nor



exploiting it. They are living their lives, doing their jobs, and trying to take care of the people around them” (p. 3).

Building upon this insight, Badaracco suggests that real ethical leadership is about solving everyday problems. “These situations don’t come labeled as strategic or critical, and they aren’t reserved for people at the top of organizations. Anyone can face these challenges almost all the time” (p. 5).

Badaracco’s book suggests that those individuals that are “leading quietly,” in the long run, accomplish more than the bold, forceful, and heroic leaders we learn about in school or read about in history books. Badaracco’s quiet leaders are neither courageous nor powerful in the conventional sense. His leaders are more likely to be working behind the scenes than on the center stage. They are careful, patient, and prudent. Most of all, they are effective.

In the end, his pragmatic and plotting leaders get things done and leave the world in a better condition than it was when they started. As Badaracco describes it:

But what do these patient, unglamorous, everyday efforts add up to? The vast majority of difficult, important human problems—both inside and outside organizations—are not solved by a swift, decisive stroke from someone at the top. What usually matters are careful, thoughtful, small practical efforts by people working far from the limelight. *In short, quiet leadership is what moves and changes the world* (p. 9, emphasis added).

In Badaracco’s sense, Aaron is a quiet leader. Even as Aaron is learning what it means to lead his own life, his actions and thousands of others like them, can teach the rest of us what it means to be a religious person in today’s world.

I have purposely chosen to begin this book on ethics with a dilemma that seemingly does not involve ethics at all but rather is about religious ritual, the observance of Shabbat. One of the reasons I have done this is to emphasize the fact that the familiar distinction between ethics and religious ritual is not at all black and white as it might first appear. From a Jewish perspective, conversations about ethics are conducted with a religious vocabulary. Ethics emerges first from religion. The very same ability that helps us to stand up to an investment banker and tell him that we need to leave in order to get home for Shabbat may also, in the future, help us to stand up to the very same investment banker and tell him that we can't participate in a sham business transaction either!