

The Jewish Ethics Workbook: Chapter Ten

Journey Onwards

Each tribe was unwilling to be the first to enter the sea. Then sprang forward Nachshon the son of Amminadab and descended first into the sea. (Sotah 37a)

The children of Israel were thrown out of Egypt, almost against their will. But, as the Torah tells us, Pharaoh changed his mind one last time. “What is it we have done that we sent Israel away?” (Exodus 14:5), Pharaoh rhetorically asked, as he ordered the final attack on his former slaves.

The children of Israel are pinned against the sea. The strong scent of rebellion was in the air. “Moshe, let us alone so that we may serve Egypt” (Exodus 14:12).

Every man said to the other, “I will not go down into the deep waters.” Nachshon ben Amminadab, alone, stood up and silently plunged into the raging sea. The entire tribe of Judah followed his courageous example.

The talmud at Sotah 36b, in the name of Rabbi Yehuda, fills in the details and teaches us that it is because the tribe of Judah “sanctified God’s name” at the sea that Judah was granted dominion in Israel. Nachshon, until now, a relative unknown, demonstrated his unswerving faith. His *emunah* was a spark for others so much so that the chapter concludes by stating that the entire people of Israel “believed in God” (Exodus 14:31).

Nachshon overcame any doubts he may have had. He alone obeyed Moshe’s command to “journey onwards” (Exodus 14:15). Nachshon certainly must have feared for his own life, but in overcoming this fear, Nachshon demonstrated his worthiness.

Leaving it at this, however, misses the real point of this famous *misdrash*. Nachshon and all of the children of Israel faced an even greater fear than that of drowning in the sea.. An interpretation closer to the spirit of this text and the surrounding verses suggests that every man said to the other “I will not go down into the deep waters” not because of a fear that the waters would *not* split, but just the opposite. The real fear was that--it just might be the case--that the waters *would* split. Let me explain.

The children of Israel correctly sensed that this was not just any old moment in time, but this was the *point of no return*. If the waters split and they pass through to the other side of the sea, they will never be able to go back to Egypt. In the future, they may dream of returning, but the way back to where they have lived their entire lives has been forever closed. That’s scary!

The splitting waters are a path to freedom, but they also represent a permanent barrier to returning to Egypt. The Torah is explicit on this point. That's why God took them on a long-cut. "God guided them not through the land of the Philistines, although that was near; for God said, perhaps the people will repent when they see war, and they will return to Egypt" (Exodus 13:17).

Choosing the path of no return is no easy task. At the binding of Isaac, for example, Abraham passed just such a test.

The "sanctification of God's name" does not reside in the fact that Nachshon believed in and relied on miracles. That can't be it. This story follows the dramatic ten plagues. Who other than a Pharaoh, whose heart has been hardened by an act of God, might still doubt God's ability to perform miracles? Miracles, in turns out, are the easy part.

Choosing a life of freedom over slavery is the real test here. In plunging into the sea and journeying onwards, Nachshon overcame his fear—not that the waters would *not* split—but the very real fear that the waters *would* split. Nachshon's action is a direct response to the explicit suggestion that the children of Israel return to Egypt. He doesn't argue and he doesn't debate the point with those that would like to return. In jumping into the sea, the option of returning to Egypt is removed once and for all. Nachshon and everyone else knows that the sea will part once, but never again.

Moshe's Tough Choice

When it comes to the most difficult ethical choices in life, it is never easy. Taking one path, like Nachshon ben Amminadab did, always means giving up on another. When you "journey onwards" it is almost as if you leave your old self behind. This is one of the reasons why the amazing story that my former student Moshe told me was so painful for him.

The story is amazing not so much because it is unique, but more because of how reflective and insightful Moshe is in telling his story. All of my students are exceptionally intelligent, but Moshe is one of the most thoughtful and mature students it has been my pleasure to know.

Moshe was born and raised in Bnei Brak, one of the most traditional and "isolated" Jewish communities in the world.

When I say isolated, I refer to isolation from the outside world. Televisions, for example, and even radios were taboo, as well as anything else which held, even in potential form, any suggestion contradictory to orthodox Jewish principles and morals. My life was fairly simple with well-defined rules which stemmed from Jewish law codes. Yet, there was always a yearning in my heart to see what was on the "other side" of the fence. I thought to myself if it is prohibited, then it must be quite good and appealing.

For most of his life, Moshe had never watched television or listened to the radio and until quite recently, Moshe did not speak a word of English. In the eighth grade, Moshe entered yeshiva. He says, "This was a new and exciting time in my life and I took it very seriously...a little too

seriously.”

Moshe began to study books of *mussar* or, as he translates it, books of “self-affliction and personal growth.” “I took the study of *mussar* very seriously and worked on particular aspects of my character which I felt needed improvement. I would look into myself and try to assess my strengths and weaknesses and see how I could combat bad habits and strengthen good ones even more.” This process began when Moshe was 14 years old!

Moshe was incredibly tough on himself. “I would not give myself credit for my hard work, and even if I felt a sense of achievement, I would force it down as unholy pride.” For four years, Moshe was unrelenting. He would study day and night, purposely limiting his sleep and his food intake – “for the purposes of self-restraint, personal growth, and to save time.”

Boys Just Want to Have Fun

At age of 18, Moshe simply could not take his self-imposed regimen anymore. He was burnt-out. “I had lost my motivation. I just wanted to be a normal guy and have fun. I wanted to just play sports, hang out with girls, and do all the other thrilling and normal things guys my age do.”

He began to sleep-in, he fell behind in his studies, and he was increasingly depressed about just about everything. His feelings for Judaism cooled. “I started to think of leaving orthodoxy, or, if you will, the only way of life I knew, and becoming secular.” For Moshe, “it was all or nothing, black or white, good or bad, holy or not!”

As Moshe contemplated his life-altering decision, he realized that the secular life was probably not as great as he imagined it to be. “The desire I had for the secular world was romanticized and enlarged from within because it was forbidden to me. The grass is *always* greener on the other side.”

He also knew how hard it would be on his parents and friends. “Of great concern to me was the welfare of my family and friends who would be devastated by such a move on my part.”

Moshe was agitated and extremely lonely. “I spent many sleepless nights tossing and turning in my bed.” He says that the hardest part of his ordeal “was the fact that I had to struggle with it all by myself. I had *noone* who I felt I could talk to, since on such a matter I could trust noone.”

Moshe was angry and full of fear. He worried that he would not be able to make it in the secular world. He was concerned that his parents would disown him. He knew that this was one of those decisions that would take him beyond the point of no return. If he took the plunge, there would be no going back to the way things had always been.

Here’s how Moshe summarized his situation at the time:

On the one hand, I felt that Judaism is the truthful way for me to live and that I just had to take my situation as nothing more than an overwhelmingly hard challenge, but

nonetheless stay within Judaism's way of life. On the other hand, I felt angry at the lack of understanding from particular people who to me represented Judaism. They were rotten to the core as human beings. Also, I thought that it was morally wrong for me to live a lifestyle which I hated, and I was miserable in, just so my parents would be happy. That is surely not God's will of me.

Moshe continued to think through his dilemma on an intellectual and rational level, weighing both sides of the argument as carefully as he could. But, with 20-20 hindsight, Moshe says that, in the end, his decision to leave orthodoxy was forced by a deeper, emotional pull. "It almost felt like it was God Himself who pulled me, against my will, away from my sheltered life, so that I could see the real world as it is, for better or worse." Is this a kind of rationalization? Maybe, but I don't think so, and neither does Moshe.

The Big Move

Moshe contacted an organization that is designed to help people like him who are thinking about leaving the *chareidi* world. He met with a guidance counselor who advised him on some of the consequences of his decision. A few months after meeting with the advisor, Moshe had resolved, once and for all, to leave his familiar community.

I finally made the big move! On the first day of what would have been my fifth year in yeshiva, in the beginning of the *zeman* or semester, I left my home with my suitcases. My parents ordered a taxi for me. Last kisses good-bye. My mother: "*Shtiyg* away (learn well and grow spiritually) sweetie." "Okay, *Eema* (mom)."

Instead of going to the yeshiva, I told the cab driver to take me to the bus station. I called a representative of the organizations and told them they must find me a home or I will stay in the street that night.

That very same night, Moshe stayed with an elderly woman who was associated with the organization he had contacted. He couldn't believe his good fortune. The woman didn't just have a television set, she had cable, too! "I recall the joy I felt then. It was heaven on earth; I spent all night switching from MTV Europe to the NBA basketball game and then quickly back to MTV! Not to miss! Could it be a video clip of Madonna up next?"

The next few months went by quickly. Moshe moved into a youth hostel, found a job at a car wash in Tel Aviv, and enrolled in a public school with evening hours. The euphoria of the first night quickly vanished, as Moshe learned that the "real world wasn't always pretty."

Almost immediately after his move, Moshe began training for his military service. In a few more months, he would join the Israeli army. He hoped to make it into an elite commando unit, and he knew that to qualify he would have to be in top physical condition. The incredible energy he had once directed toward *mussar* was now channeled into his demanding and frequent workouts. Moshe was anxiously looking forward to serving his country. "I wished to be in the best unit possible and to give my all on behalf of my brethren and country." So much for having a good

time, I guess.

About three weeks before he was to enter the army, Moshe contacted his family and told them about his intentions to join the army. Moshe's parents informed him that his grandparents, who lived in the United States, had invited him to come visit them and would pay for his trip. Moshe thought that perhaps this would be a nice break. He decided to go, "but with a clear intention to return shortly to Israel to take the entrance exams for the commando units." His grandparents promised him that he could continue his training in the U.S. at the local Jewish Community Center just as easily as in Israel.

This was clearly a time of turmoil for Moshe. How could it not have been? "A new and great dilemma started to unfold again in my life, while the first one was not yet solved."

Moshe began to have some serious doubts about going back to Israel and joining the army. He began to entertain the idea of staying in the United States, at least for a while. In the United States he could try to find some kind of middle ground in his life, some room to breathe.

Most poignantly, Moshe felt that if he returned to Israel, given the cultural expectations there, he would have to give up his religion completely and this was something that he wasn't sure he was prepared to do.. He would be "living in Israel as a secular Jew with all of its implications." If he stayed in the United States, "I could live with freedom to do what I want."

Moshe described his thought process as follows:

I felt that the opportunity to learn English and go to college would head me in the right direction towards financial stability. Also, while in college I could explore different fields and find out more about the world and what's available to me. I thought of being a philosophy major to find answers to some questions I had.

In the end, Moshe decided to enroll at Yeshiva University's Sy Syms School of Business.

Throughout my time in the States, I slowly found my self, and gained a new, different and deeper appreciation for Judaism. I took things slowly this time, making sure not to jump too far ahead of myself. I now feel that I found myself to a large extent, though naturally, there is always room for growth. I feel like my decision to stay was, thank God, indeed the right one. Yet I sometimes wonder...

A Life of Integrity

The story that Moshe tells is just the first chapter in his moral biography. No one, not even Moshe himself, knows how this story will continue and end. Throughout his ordeal, Moshe is searching for something. I'm not sure that he knows exactly what it is that he's looking for, and as an outsider, neither am I. Nevertheless, as I read and re-read Moshe's story, it is the word "integrity" that keeps coming back to me. This is one of the reasons why I think his story is worth studying with care.

I think we need to go slow here because integrity is one of those over-sized words that can mean almost everything and almost nothing simultaneously. What does integrity entail? And, how does Moshe's story help us get a better handle on it?

The dictionary tells us that integrity is the quality of being honest and upright. I think it's more, though. Integrity is a kind of balance. It includes many different elements: curiosity and wonder, honesty, patience, humor, a willingness to take risks, authenticity, and a desire to learn and to grow.

Maybe one way to define integrity is the process of combining these different elements into something whole. Taking some of this and some of that, and putting it together in a way that is just right for you, in a way that finally makes sense; that is real and durable and life affirming. Integrity is part discovery and part invention. It is an ongoing and never ending process.

All of the elements of integrity that I have identified are important individually, but possessing too much of one without the others is debilitating. Being curious is good, but being too curious can get you into big trouble. Being patient is a virtue, but there must be a limit even to patience; there comes a point where one must take action. Too much humor and life becomes a big joke. Taking risks is necessary, but foolish and unnecessary risk-taking can be dangerous to your well-being. Even honesty taken to the extreme can be silly and even quite hurtful (that outfit looks horrible on you—it makes you look even stupider than you really are). As the book of Kohelet has it, "Everything has its season, and there is a time for everything under the sun. A time to be born and a time to die; a time to plant and a time to uproot" (Chapter 3: 1-2). So, too, with integrity.

Curiosity and Wonder

As Moshe tells his story, his curiosity and wonder are driving him right from the beginning. As he put it, "there was always a yearning in my heart to see what was on the 'other side' of the fence." Having lived his entire life in the sheltered world of Bnei Brak, Moshe had an incredible urge to explore the world out-there for himself. He loved his parents and he was grateful to his community, but for Moshe the world beyond Bnei Brak has a special allure and attraction that demands exploration.

Honesty

Even while Moshe is curious and full of wonder about the outside world, he is always honest with himself and his expectations. He knows that he is "romanticizing" his view of secular life and he also realizes that part of the allure of leaving the *charedi* world is that the "grass is always greener on the other side."

Patience

Moshe demonstrates his patience throughout his whole story. His decision to make the "big

move” is not one that he arrives at in an impulsive way. It is one that he has contemplated for a long time. It is one that he has tried to look at in an objective and rational way to the best of his abilities. In addition, his final decision to stay in the United States and pursue his education also reflects a quiet patience.

Humor

Moshe’s description of himself flipping through the cable channels hoping to get a glimpse of a Madonna video conveys a sense of humor and perspective. This was surely one of the most difficult and anxiety-inducing nights of his young life. But, even while Moshe takes himself seriously (or, even too seriously, as he himself put it), he can also see and laugh at life’s absurdities from time to time.

A Willingness to Take Risks

Like Nachshon, Moshe knows that the decisions that he is making are life-altering. He knows that whatever he chooses, he has gone beyond the point of no return. The path back to his isolated existence at a yeshiva in Bnei Brak has been closed. Whatever happens, things will never be the way they were.

Authenticity

Authenticity is another one of these really huge words (like integrity itself). Something is authentic if it is genuine. But what does it mean to live an “authentic” life?

Most importantly, you must be true to yourself and to your history. The problem is, though, that sometimes being true to yourself seems like you’re betraying your history, and at other times, being true to your history might seem like your giving up on yourself and your own unique dreams and visions.

This desire for authenticity is expressed over and over again in Moshe’s story. “I felt that Judaism is the truthful way for me to live...” But, at the same time, “I thought that it was morally wrong for me to live a lifestyle which I hated, and I was miserable in, just so my parents would be happy.”

A Desire to Learn and Grow

To me this is the heart and soul of what a life of integrity is all about. One has to find a philosophy, and a practice, and a community that will enable him or her to continue learning and growing throughout life. The more self-conscious one is about this the better.

This is why I’m so inspired by Moshe’s story. Certainly noone would have blamed Moshe had he decided to stay put in Bnei Brak. He loved his parents, he wanted to stay true to his Jewish beliefs of his childhood, and he enjoyed his friends. I’m sure that had he taken this route, that even in Bnei Brak he would have continued to discover his own way towards a life of integrity.

But, for him, given his gifts and ideals, I think it would have been extremely difficult.

I also believe that had he chosen to return to Israel immediately to join the Israeli army and to live a completely secular life that he would have enjoyed a degree of fulfillment in serving to defend his country and people. I also believe he would have eventually found his way back to his roots, and to what for him is a more genuine and authentic life. But, again, this would have been denying too much of his own self and traditions for too long a time.

Moshe's choice to stay in the United States and to further pursue his education to some might seem a kind of cop out, almost selfish. I don't see it that way. His decision to slow things down and "not to get too far ahead of himself this time" betray a worthy and practical wisdom. In recognizing that everything is not "all or nothing, black or white, good or bad, holy or not!" Moshe has taken a huge step forward in his moral development. He says now that "there is always room for growth." And, to me, arriving at this insight and living it everyday is the whole point of integrity!

Conclusion

In the end it is still fair to ask whether or not Moshe has achieved that perfect blend of curiosity and wonder, honesty, patience, humor, a willingness to take risks, authenticity, and a desire to learn and to grow. Does he display the unflinching courage of a Nachshon to make those decisions that take us beyond the point of no return?

But, maybe in searching for perfection and in comparing Moshe to the moral geniuses of the past, we're asking far too much of him, or anyone else for that matter. Perhaps a better question is whether or not he has achieved a good enough blend. Rather than answering this question definitively let me allow Moshe to defend himself here:

Since in the end I must make and live with the outcome of the final decision, I dealt with it myself. I did make many mistakes along the way, which could have been avoided. Nevertheless, I gained the ability to take charge and make decisions myself, which is a most valuable tool in my possession. As I continue to move through life, I hold on to the lessons I learned and apply them when necessary. As long as I continue to grow from my mistakes by making the right choices the next time around, it's indeed worthwhile.

In high school, Moshe thought life in Bnei Brak was "fairly simple with well-defined rules." But, I'm not so sure it's even that simple in Bnei Brak for those that decide to stay. My last encounter with Moshe was at graduation. I saw him from afar mingling among the hundreds of students and parents. As I approached him, I noticed that he was flanked by two elderly people, both short and looking somewhat out of place and almost lost in their traditional *chareidi* garb. I said "hello" to Moshe and he introduced me to his father and mother. Despite the language barrier, we tried to communicate with each other as best we could. In my less than perfect Hebrew, I told Moshe's parents what a pleasure it had been having him as a student and what a mature and intelligent young man he was. Moshe's father shook hands with me and politely thanked me. As he released my hand, Moshe's father gently smiled and whispered, "we know, we know."

