

The Jewish Ethics Workbook: Chapter Twelve

Conclusion: Some Personal Reflections

The entire world is a narrow bridge, and the important thing is not to be afraid at all. (Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav)

Looking back at the stories in this book, I am struck by the many and varied obstacles that stop us on our quests for leading meaningful lives. In every story there is always an obstacle, something in the way, blocking us from getting to where we think we should be.

These obstacles include fear, our own rationalizing minds, a lack of trust, physical constraints, a wish to fit in with our friends, lack of respect or care for those different from ourselves, an unexpected illness, loneliness, and a basic uncertainty about what the truly ethical course of action might be.

We have seen from these stories that there is no set formula to overcome these obstacles. The stories that my students describe are not intellectual puzzles that can be solved like algebraic equations once and for all.

Sometimes it is obvious what the right course of action is. If you're driving your car and you hit someone by mistake, you not only have an ethical obligation to stop, you have a legal obligation, as well. In a situation like this, it's black and white. But this kind of formal response, however true from a lawyer's point of view, misses the entire point. The real question is, what does it feel like to hit someone with your car? How can I overcome or channel my fear and anger, my frustration, and my instinct to flee, when I'm in the moment? To begin to understand what it means to live a life of integrity, it's not enough to play the wise and detached spectator and view life from the outside looking in, but we must experience life's ups and downs from the inside looking out.

Outside In

In teaching ethics, we try to move away from the world and disengage ourselves from it. We try to place ourselves high above the fray to gain a more accurate view of what is happening below us. We look, if not for universal principles, then for the most general and all-inclusive formulations. As objectively as we can, we categorize, analyze, and make all kinds of distinctions. We move from topic to topic, from environmental issues to employee relations, from sex discrimination to product safety. We try to get students to see connections they might not readily see on their own. We provide reasonable arguments to convince students to make sound ethical choices.

But how useful is this approach when you are faced with a real-world ethical dilemma? As all of us know, ethical problems look and feel so differently from the inside than they do from the

outside. While getting the “right” answer on a test in the classroom is relatively easy, figuring out the right thing to do in real-life and then actually doing it is incredibly difficult.

Inside Out

Overcoming our obstacles and acting in an ethical way requires a schooled-intellect, but it also requires caring and empathy, patience, emotional intelligence, and an ability to read and understand others’ motives, as well as one’s own. Living an ethical life requires a strength of character, a deep sense of purpose, shrewdness, a feeling of being connected to others, and a supportive and loving community. It’s not only about making isolated decisions one at a time, as it might seem from sitting in on an ethics class, but it’s about crafting a worthy life plan and living it out everyday among family, friends, neighbors, and co-workers. Being in the moment, it is almost impossible to see things in an objective way. Telling someone in the midst of a crisis to act in such a way as to “maximize the world’s happiness” or to follow the 18th century philosopher Immanuel Kant’s famous “categorical imperative” hardly seems useful.

From the inside it seems that there are no easy to apply universal principles because each case feels so unique. There are no separate topics; every decision impacts every other decision. In the real world you never know with certainty if you’ve made the best, or even a good, choice. What may seem today as efficient and clever, may in the long run seem foolish and immature. Preferences and values evolve over time.

It is because of this, that each of us needs to think carefully, *and for ourselves*, about our true aspirations. What are the values that I choose to make my own and to make real through my actions? What kind of a life do I want to live? We don’t ask and answer these questions once and leave it at that, but we must continually strive to fine-tune and adjust our philosophy in real-time, in a constantly changing world.

In this last chapter, I offer some of my own thoughts on living a good Jewish life. These are my aspirations and I don’t expect them to be yours or anyone else’s. I don’t include this discussion to convince you that my way is the right way or the only way, but I include this material as part of an ever growing dialogue where all of us are equal participants. This is how *I* see the world from my unique perspective. How do *you* see it?

Aspirations

1-Accept

The first of my ten aspirations is acceptance. Acceptance is the acknowledgment that the world is what it is. It is not the way I would like it to be, nor is it the way I think it should be. *But, it is what it is.*

Acceptance is the opposite of magical thinking. When I engage in magical thinking, I see the world through the filter of my own fantasies. I see what I want to see, what I wish to be there. I perceive only what I imagine that the world can be like. I forget (or I don’t want to remember) that the world can surprise me. These surprises can be for the better, or they can be for the worse.

Acceptance is not something that happens all at once. As I travel through life, I experience its mysteries, joys, horrors, sadness, and silliness. When the volume gets too high, I shut life out, and this works for a while. Like a young child, I pretend that I didn't really hear that or I didn't really see that. I hide. But I can close myself off only for a little while. Acceptance is saying to myself, "it can't be, and yet it is."

Acceptance is not passive. I may accept something even when I hate it with my whole being. Acceptance is not about the future, it is about the present. I can't change what already is no matter how hard I try.

Acceptance is the first of the ten aspirations because it is the reality check. It is the only platform upon which a truly meaningful life can be built. It is only through acceptance that I can be a source of positive change for myself and others in an intelligent way. Magical thinking is the most powerful narcotic. It is a giving up on myself and the world. It is a slow suicide. Acceptance is a wake-up call. It demands courage and constant vigilance. In accepting the world, I am born to it for the second time.

2-Appreciate

The great thinkers ask, How can it be that there is anything at all? To live with my eyes open is to be constantly surprised. Appreciation is not seeing the world through rose-colored glasses. It is, despite everything, an overflowing feeling of thankfulness that I am alive and a part of all of this.

I don't know if it is really possible to live every moment mindfully—to be constantly aware and to be continually alive. I live so much of my life on automatic pilot. I'm here, but I'm not here. I am so afraid of what I will see. My thoughts are somewhere else. Even as I write these very words, my mind drifts away and comes back to them only hesitantly and with great effort. Appreciation can be built only upon acceptance. I can't appreciate that which is not. I can only appreciate that which is.

Appreciation is a *choice* we need to make everyday. We don't have to appreciate, but we do have the ability to appreciate. It is an openness to the world. It is a kind of reverence. It is being in the world and being constantly amazed by this simple fact. It is an awareness that I am not alone. It is an overcoming of my fear, if only for a few precious moments.

3-Respect

I can't respect you, if I don't respect myself first. Respect can be simple or profound. It can mean taking care of myself and others in the most mundane ways. Eating right, exercising, getting enough sleep, sticking up for my rights, caring for my home and environment.

Respect can also mean taking myself and others seriously. It is learning and recognizing what it means to be human. It is a kind of trust and a kind of faith that what I do matters in a fundamental way and makes a lasting difference in the world in which I am just a stranger and

sojourner. My effect may not be huge, but it is perceptible to me and those closest to me. It is hard to respect ourselves when we are so prone to make mistakes. Therefore, respect requires an ability to forgive and to move on.

It is the recognition that we are precious and unique beings. Everyone of us is irreplaceable. To respect oneself is to turn acceptance and appreciation in on oneself and out towards other human beings.

4-Be patient

Of the ten aspirations I list, patience may be the most difficult for me to attain. I want it and I want it now.

How does one learn to be more patient? It requires me to constantly broaden my horizons. In order for me to be more patient, I have to see and imagine the big picture. Where I am right now, in this place at this moment, is not all of reality. This *is* where I am now (and I accept that), but it is not *always* where I am.

If it's so hard to be patient with myself, how much harder is it to be patient with those around me?

Patience teaches me that just when I think I've mastered acceptance, appreciation, and respect I've got to start all over again.

Again and again, I need to relearn what it really means to say that it is what it is. Again and again, I must learn what it really means to be thankful that I am alive. Again and again, I must learn what it really means to take myself and others seriously.

Patience is the ability to tolerate suffering without the deadly poison of resentment. It is the ability to see oneself in an objective way.

It is the ability to appreciate one's unique perspective in the world. I am the only being in the universe that sees reality from the precise point that I occupy. But I must constantly remind myself there are an infinite number of other perspectives from which I can not see it.

5-Listen

I am not the only being in the universe with thoughts, and hopes, and desires, and feelings, and needs. I am not the only being in the world with a special perspective. How many times do I have to relearn this before I can grow up?

I stop what I am doing right now and listen to you. I don't just hear the words or see the body language. I must be silent and figure out what you are trying to tell me. I must purposely turn off my own voice and listen to yours. Am I the only one that finds this excruciatingly difficult?

You are reaching into my soul. You are calling me and trying to get me to see you just as you are right now, not as I wish you to be. You want me to share your pain, your fear, your laughter, your happiness, your sadness, your surprise, your wonder, your joy, your amazement. You want to learn from me and you want to teach me.

More than anything, you want to let me know that you see me, you hear me, and you feel with me. You are like me in so many ways, but you are not me and in the end I fear I will not hear everything you want to tell me. I am afraid that no matter how hard I try, I hear my own voice and call it yours.

Only when we begin to listen, can we begin to be with someone else. Listening is not just about words, it is about letting you in and going in to be with you.

Listening is scary, but not listening is even scarier because then I really am alone.

6-Respond

These words that I am stringing together right now are a response. The words themselves are not my words. They belong to all of us. I am temporarily rearranging them. Trying to order them in a way that signals my thoughts and feelings to you. I am crying out, "I am here. And, I hear you." Responding can be as simple as a momentary acknowledgment that I know that you too are a human being—just a passing glance into your eyes. A brief moment of recognition, a sharing of a secret. My eyes are a mirror in which you see your own humanity, just as I can see my humanity reflected in your eyes.

Responding can be beginning a relationship with you. "Let's work together on this project of mutual interest. Let's help each other and not just use each other." Responding is my acting in the world in an ethically appropriate way. Responding means being responsible.

At its best, responding can also be a life-long commitment and partnership, a covenant. I vow to you everyday that I will be here always with you. To listen to you, to hold you, to support you, and to even let you go, if that's what you really want. But I will never forget you.

7-Find Meaning

Finding meaning is building a temporary home in the universe, a kind of *sukka*. It is satisfying life's most elusive but precious goal even if just for short time. I try to define meaning but just as I think I've captured its essence, it's gone. I can not keep hold of it. It is here and then it is gone.

There is a kind of meaning that I can discover. It is out there. It is waiting for me. But, unless I make it my own, somehow put my own primitive mark on it, it's not real. To find meaning is to find a unique purpose, but it is more. It is to express that purpose in the everyday world. Finding

meaning is not just an intellectual exercise it is a way of life, a way of being in the world.

Meaning evolves over time. What was meaningful yesterday, may no longer be meaningful today. To continue to worship yesterday's meaning is to idolize it. You can't build meaning by yourself. If meaning is not somehow shared it is a pretend meaning, just a figment of my imagination. Meaning is what allows me to live a life of integrity *and* connection. To live a meaningful life is to live a spiritual life.

8-Persist

There are overwhelming moments in my life when evil becomes so real and so tangible. I see evil, I feel it, I touch it, I hear it, and I smell its terrible stench. It has been there all along, only I didn't notice it.

Life's taken for granted meaning disappears. What seemed so important yesterday is trivial today. I go through the motions, but why? I am without hope. A friend literally becomes a deformed monster overnight. Other friends become silent and can't stand to see what I am forced to see so clearly. They abandon me in my hour of need. No philosophy can help me. No words can soothe me. No book can comfort me.

There have been moments in my life where I have believed in nothing except for those precious few who hang in there with me. In them, I never lose faith. Never. They are my only thread connecting me to this world.

But I will not cave in. I persist. I pick myself back up. With the precious few, we rebuild what has been shattered by the monster. As the song says, "They can stand me up at the gates of hell, but I won't back down." If there is no meaning out there, with your help, we will build it from the ground up.

In time the monster is diminished. He becomes smaller and smaller. Now, he is pathetic and sad, and I almost feel sorry for him, but it is not for me to forgive him. He is still there, but he is harmless. He is gone. And, we go on together...

9-Enjoy

Enjoyment is not just the satisfaction of physical needs, although it certainly is that too.

Enjoyment is the feeling of accomplishment that comes from living up to my aspirations. Enjoyment is not the goal, but it is more like the happy byproduct that comes from completing other goals. There is enjoyment in listening, in responding, in finding meaning. Even in persisting there is a special kind of enjoyment (although I would never seek it out).

10-Love

Love is the last of the ten aspirations because it is the most important. All of the other aspirations point to love.

To love is to live. Love is being here with you, right now. Nothing else matters. Nothing else exists.

Love is the most powerful of all the emotions. If you are patient and if you persist, it eventually overwhelms sadness, grief, fear, and even pure hate. To love, in its deepest sense, is to grow up together.

Love requires luck, but it also requires hard work. You don't really fall in love, you choose to make love and then you work on it for the rest of your lives. And, the best thing of all about love is that it knows no bounds.

In the end, love is not in me and love is not in you, but love is that tiny but ever growing part of reality that contains and sustains us both. There is nothing magical about it.

Some Final Thoughts

Years ago, I wrote an essay analyzing the biblical story of Yosef and his brothers in Egypt. In that essay, I suggested the possibility that Yosef's brothers may have discovered Yosef's identity before Yosef reveals himself to them. If this is the case, then when Yehuda confronts Yosef at the climax of the story, Yehuda already knows who the viceroy is.

I liked this interpretation then and still like it, even if it is a stretch, because if it is true, Yehuda is not threatening the viceroy with words (as is sometimes suggested), but he is having a dialogue with Yosef. They are not talking at each other as strangers do, but they are talking to each other as brothers should. While Yosef and Yehuda are both unique individuals, they are also mutually aware of the deep connection and history that they share.

In my mind, this conversation is the first recorded dialogue centered on Jewish ethics. This is, in fact, the model of how we do ethics from a Jewish perspective.

Yehuda's impassioned speech becomes more humane, given that he has listened to the many hints about his identity that Yosef has dropped along the way (picking on Shimon in particular, inquiring about the welfare of the brothers' father, and sitting the brothers in the correct birth order.) Yehuda picks up on these signals, finally understands his brother, and sees him for who he is. He begs Yosef to return Benjamin.

Yehuda does not know if Yosef will forgive the family. But, at least they are engaged in a dialogue Yehuda verbally acknowledges the sin which they had committed. In response to this deeply moving scene, Yosef is moved finally to end the charade and formally acknowledge what his brothers have already picked up on. Yosef hears the strength of Yehuda's words because Yehuda himself hears the echo of Yosef's cries.

The obstacle and vivid memories of hate separating Yosef from his brothers would seem insurmountable. One of the great lessons in Breishit is that obstacles are permanent barriers only if this is what we truly wish.

Natan Sharansky tells us that while he was imprisoned he found hope in the words of Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav. “The entire world is a narrow bridge, and the important thing is not to be afraid at all.” This statement can be interpreted in many different ways. I think of this narrow bridge as the voice of dialogue that connects together the unique experiences of each one of us. And, it is this narrow bridge that we are all so fearful of that constitutes the final goal of Jewish ethics.