

# The Jewish Ethics Workbook: Chapter Two

## I Don't Want to Be a Cheater

*If I am not for myself, who will be for me? And, being for myself only, what am I?  
(Avot: Chapter 3, Mishnah 14)*

In the previous chapter, I introduced Aaron. As you recall, in a moment of fear and anxiety, he panicked and violated one of his most deeply-held and cherished principles. And, for what? He drove on Shabbat to buy rice cakes for his camp so his summer-job boss wouldn't get even madder at him than he already was.

Aaron learned something about himself from this sad episode, and he used this defining moment to strengthen his resolve for the future. He was not going to make the same mistake twice, and when faced with an even harder test just a few months later, Aaron took a bold and uncompromising position, walking out on a job interview at a prestigious investment bank in order to make it home in time for Shabbat.

Aaron's initial failure is an example of one of the most difficult problems that all of us face. It has been called by psychologists "the problem of the weak will." It occurs whenever the immediate rewards of choosing a particular action overwhelm us. We act in a short-sighted way in order to obtain instant gratification even though we know that in the long run we will come to regret our action. Think about an overweight person eating a piece of chocolate cake or a gambler cashing his weekly paycheck at a Las Vegas casino and gambling it away.

In the end, Aaron teaches an important lesson about never giving up on ourselves, never surrendering. Whenever I talk about this subject with students, I always think of Rocky Balboa in the fight scene at the end of the first Rocky movie.

Round after bloody round, Rocky gets blasted by his opponent Apollo Creed. But, Rocky simply "won't back down," (to quote the rock singer Tom Petty). He gets punched in the head and knocked down over and over again, but he keeps getting up for more. Rocky doesn't think he can win the fight against his opponent Apollo Creed, but he wants to go the distance with the champion of the world.

Emphasizing this ability to keep getting back up after life knocks us down is an important place to begin a discussion about what it means to be an ethical person. After all, no matter how great we are, nobody is perfect, and eventually we will all need a second chance.

But, we can't stop here. Perhaps, more important than not giving up on ourselves is the

question of this chapter: How can we get it right the first time? To answer this, we have to understand a little more about the problem of the weak will.

### **What is a Weak Will?**

Some scientists now believe that humans (and animals) are actually hard-wired to prefer short term gains at the expense of long-term and more permanent rewards. The social scientist, George Ainslie, for example, has noted, “Pigeons will choose a shorter, earlier access to grain over a later, larger one when the shorter one is immediate and not when it’s delayed.”. This is the same pattern of behavior that we find over and over again in human beings, as well.

I remember a friend of mine from college who used to consistently put off studying for exams and writing his term papers. My favorite excuse of his went like this. “Well, I can watch Monday Night Football tonight because I have so much studying to do--I’m gonna be up all night anyway.” While there is a kind of perverse logic here, I think his excuse for not studying perfectly captures the essence of the problem of the weak will.

In Aaron’s case, he chose the immediate “reward” of not angering his boss over what he knew to be his true long term interests; keeping Shabbat. In Jewish terms, in this instance, his *yetzer hara* (evil inclination) overwhelmed his *yetzer hatov* (good inclination).

Now, if it is true that all of us suffer from this problem (at least on occasion), and if we are *aware* that we suffer from it (as most of us are), surely there must be something we can do about it. The question really boils down to this: *How do we learn to protect ourselves from ourselves?*

### **To Cheat or Not to Cheat? That is the Question**

Consider the following scenario. Sarah is a college student attending Yeshiva University. She is a bright, hard-working young woman of high ideals and ambitions. She is a double-major in psychology and philosophy. While this doesn’t necessarily mean that she has twice as much work as her peers, it does mean that she has more work than the average Yeshiva University student.

Sarah was in the middle of studying for her midterm exams, and her take-home *gemorah* test was already a week overdue. According to the instructions of her teacher, students were supposed to complete the exam on their own without books, notes, or other aids of any kind. They were encouraged to study the material *before* they looked at the exam, but were prohibited to re-check any materials *after* they had a chance to read the test questions.

This semester had been particularly difficult for Sarah. She was taking several demanding courses and had little or no time to prepare for her *gemorah* test. She had attended most of the *shiurim* (classes) and was relatively confident that she would remember enough of the material to at least pass the exam. But, as she tore open the sealed envelope that

contained the exam and began to read it, her heart started pumping faster and faster. Maybe her attendance was not as good as she remembered? Whatever the case, there were many questions that looked unfamiliar to her.

According to Sarah:

I wanted to perform well. The thought of bombing the midterm and disappointing my *Rebbe* [teacher] was worrisome. As such, the temptation to glance at my notes and to “clarify” a few things I could not remember was very real. I couldn’t help but think that this situation would be much easier if he forced us to take the test in class. It would get rid of the potential for a problem.

Right off the bat, I knew Sarah was in for some trouble. After all, her stated motivation for performing well was not for its own sake, but she wanted to perform well in order not to disappoint her *Rebbe*. In the long run, external rewards are almost always less commanding than internal rewards. That’s why in one of the very first statements in the *Pirkei Avot*, we are taught by Antigonos of Sokho to “Be not like the slaves who serve the master for the sake of receiving a reward, but be like the slaves who serve the master not for the sake of receiving a reward” (Chapter 1, Mishnah 3).

While some of the details may differ from situation to situation, Sarah’s problem is a common one that everyone who has attended school has faced at one time or another. It might not be a take-home exam or a *gemorah* test, but all of us want to perform well and have had the opportunity to cheat with little or no chance of ever getting caught. What to do?

In situations like this, isn’t it amazing how our own mind begins to play tricks on us. Even in this brief snippet from Sarah’s discussion of what happened, you can see how she is beginning to shift the responsibility for her decision from herself to her teacher. If only the teacher had “forced us to take the test in class.” Translation: If I cheat, it’s not my fault. It’s his fault. Sound familiar? I’m sure Aaron would know what Sarah is talking about.

As I stated in the previous chapter, Maimonides believed that our likeness to God lies in our ability to make “rational” decisions and choices. But, you better be careful here. There is a fine line between rationality (think *yetzer hatov*) and rationalization (think *yetzer hara*). In shifting the responsibility from herself to her teacher, Sarah has already begun this process.

Here are just some of the other rationalizations she makes. As always in this book, these are real and exact quotes:

1-“The situation was unique in that my review notes sat underneath my take home test.”

2-“It [the test] was required to be handed in tomorrow.”

3-“The timing of the test could not have been worse. I was in the middle of a difficult midterm season.”

4-“I found myself overwhelmed by the amount of studying and time necessary to prepare for each test.”

5-“If teachers know that students value their grade then they are almost inviting them to cheat on the [take home] exam.”

6-“A take home test leaves a lot of room for moral ambiguity.”

7-“Is it a problem to do the test in shifts, looking at the notes in between? Or is it a problem asking people questions in between parts or about the test? These [questions] are all in the ‘gray area.’”

### **How to Recognize a Rationalization When You See One**

How do you distinguish rational decision making from rationalization? Let’s examine the above list. I think that the closer you examine each of these seven items, the sillier they look. A good way to proceed and hopefully avoid the pitfalls of rationalization in a situation like this is to ask yourself, how would these reasons look to me if I were on the other side. Let’s pretend we’re the *gemorah* teacher here and examine how he might respond to each of the above items one by one.

1’-“Sarah–Take the test in the library. That way your notes won’t be so easily available.”

2’-“It is due tomorrow, but you’ve already had the test for more than a week.”

3’-“When should I give you the midterm? The first day of class?”

4’-“Welcome to the real world Sarah.”

5’-“Let me be as direct as I possibly can, I’m not “inviting you to cheat!” In fact, I’m trying to treat you like the adult you want to be.”

6’-“‘Moral ambiguity?’ Could my directions have been any clearer?”

7’-“Sarah–If you think these questions are in the ‘grey area’ just ask your ten year old sister what she thinks you should do.”

Here’s a good rule of thumb. If it looks like a rationalization and smells like a rationalization then it is a rationalization. Here’s another one. If you think you can’t be lured by the siren song of rationalization, you’re already rationalizing.

## Overcoming the Temptations of a Weak Will

Maybe I'm being a little tough on Sarah, but fortunately for her, she was even tougher on herself. In fact, as she began to spell out her rationalizations she was able to catch herself *before* she acted on them. In the end, Sarah did not cheat.

This is how she describes her thinking about how she overcame her own temptations. I quote her at length because she clarifies better than I can:

First, it is a clear violation of *g'nevat da'at*. You are giving off an impression to the professor that is not valid. If your retention of the material or work invested into the class warrants a lower grade, then falsely representing yourself to get a higher grade is a clear violation. Second, it's dishonest. You're not being honest with yourself or your professor. So even if the teacher does not get "fooled" by your work and identify it as forgery, you're still being dishonest. Third, cheating will shape your personality.

The actions you perform shape who you are or become. If you are a person who cheats, then this is how you will start acting [in the future]. First it will be glancing at notes for a take home test, then crib sheets on in-class tests, then midterms, papers etc. But this will not end with school. People that allow themselves to cheat to get ahead will cheat in every aspect of life; in business, in personal matters, etc. It is easy to see that cheating also has an effect on who you are as a person and who you shape yourself to become.

*I do not want to be a "cheater" or someone who allows personal gains at the expense of my moral fiber. I was afraid that any act of cheating could snowball into many more and more grievous acts. So it was these thoughts that ran through my head at that very moment that kept me on the straight and narrow and withheld my temptation to cheat (emphasis added).*

These powerful and moving words indicate that Sarah has achieved a significant milestone in her moral development. Instead of mere rationalizations, Sarah now gives three important reasons why it is wrong to look at her notes.

First she identifies a specific halachik rule against this kind of deception. Second, she invokes a broad moral concept of always being honest, correctly noting that even if she could fool her teacher, her actions would still be wrong! Finally, Sarah makes the important observation that in the very act of cheating, she becomes a cheater. While this last point sounds like a tautology (it's true because...well... it's true) it actually represents a new way of thinking about ethics and is an important defense against succumbing to the weak will problem. What Sarah has discovered is that ethics is about specific rules of behavior (thou shalt, thou shalt not), but ethics is also about identity (who am I? who am I becoming? who do I want to be?).

One of the reasons why this is such a powerful tool in fighting the *yetzer hara* is that it helps her realize what is really at stake in an ethical dilemma like cheating. Now, when Sarah weighs the costs and benefits of her decision, it's not just comparing the immediate gains from cheating against the pangs of guilt that will surely result from a one time slip up. Rather Sarah now realizes that her real choice is between the gains from cheating versus the fear of permanent damage to her character. Though the perceived gains from cheating don't really change, the cost of engaging in this behavior rises dramatically.

As Sarah puts it starkly, "I don't want to be a cheater." The idea that ethics is about both rules and identity has an ancient lineage. To me, Sarah's thought process is really just a specific application of Hillel's famous dictum, "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? And, being for myself only, what am I?"

None of this is meant to downplay the importance of ethical rules. In most situations rules alone provide sufficient guidelines and sufficient motivating power. Sometimes, though, it is necessary to call in additional artillery. Thinking of ethics in terms of identity is meant to support ethical rules, just as ethical rules are what help to create an ethical person.

Notice also how in the end, Sarah's motivation switches from an external source—her teacher's approval—to an internal source—What kind of a persona am I? Since Sarah will soon be graduating and she will no longer have the support and help of her teachers, this is a better and safer way to go. Ben Azzai knew this almost two thousand years ago when he taught that the reward of a *mitzvah* is the *mitzvah* (Pirkei Avot: Chapter 4, Mishnah 2).

## **Conclusion**

Let's step back for a moment. What can we learn from Sarah's story?

Aaron said in the last chapter "when the going got tough, I gave in and compromised my beliefs." His story taught us that a lack of awareness of our own special human ability to choose can have extremely bad repercussions. Fortunately, Aaron learned this lesson quickly and didn't make the same mistake again and so he also taught us to hang in there.

In this chapter, Sarah shows us that it's possible to get things right the first time.

In the end I did score a respectable grade, but well under my usual performance. However, I am proud of this test. Although I am not happy with the amount of time I was able to prepare this test, this was a moral victory. I was able to stick to my morals and repulse the temptation to cheat. Thank God I can proudly sit here today and proclaim that I am not a person who cheats, and this holds true for the past, present, and future.

Sarah's approach to her dilemma introduces a new way of thinking about ethical problems. She knows that cheating means...well... that you're a cheater. And, no one wants to believe that they're really a cheater. Right?

