

The Jewish Ethics Workbook: Chapter Five

An Etrog, A Car, and Some Beer

The more flesh, the more worms.

(Avot: Chapter 2, Mishnah 8)

Each of the ethical leaders and would-be leaders introduced in the earlier chapters of this book struggled with the question of identity, asking themselves “who am I?” or “who are we?”

Aaron was surprised and frightened by his boss’s request to drive into town so close to Shabbat and momentarily forgot who he really was. Sarah realized, just in time, that she did not want to risk becoming a cheater and so, in the end, she decided not to look at her notes even though this would have improved her score on the take-home *gemorah* exam. Yosef seized an opportunity to express his own identity. Through his modest gift of cookies and juice, he taught his classmates and his teacher what a caring community looks like. Natan Sharansky wanted more than anything to be reunited with his wife Avital who was already living in Israel. But, he recognized that compromising with the KGB would mean compromising his integrity and this was too high a price for him to pay.

Finding our own voice, discovering our own identity, presupposes as an ability to choose wisely. But no one is born with this ability; despite the famous song, no one is “born free.” You don’t inherit freedom the way you inherit eye color. The experience of freedom develops slowly over time.

The ability to choose is like the ability to read or to write. To begin with, you have to have some basic natural abilities and talents (nothing beyond the ordinary), but you also need to be in the right place at the right time. You need to be exposed to good teachers and role models. And, just as there is no upper limit on how well you master these skills, so too there is no upper limit on learning how to choose wisely. As the philosopher Daniel Dennett has recently put it, “freedom evolves.”

Freedom’s journey begins by becoming more self-aware. It begins when you start to ask yourself, “Well, why did I do *that*?” To answer this question, though, we need to understand something about human motives. Or, to put all of this in much simpler terms, in order to learn how to manage ourselves better, we need to know what makes us tick.

The Great Variety of Human Motives or Why Bother at All?

Ethics is about improving our behavior and ourselves. In order to accomplish this task, it is important to explore the rich tapestry of human motivation and to begin to ask about the

differences between legitimate human needs and illegitimate desires. How do we tell the difference?

This book can't possibly cover all human motives; the list is as long and as varied as we are. Psychologists, for example, have identified all of the following motives and more: thirst, hunger, sex, safety, money, a need to belong, a need to love and to be loved, reputation, self-esteem, self-efficacy, power, the needs to express gratitude and reverence, religion, spirituality, curiosity, a desire to learn and grow, self-actualization, a desire to avoid boredom, the search for meaning and purpose in life, a longing to create, and, last but definitely not least, a desire to make a lasting contribution to the world.

Instead of presenting a formal theory of human motivation here, this chapter will examine the following three vignettes to see what we can learn about this topic and how we can use this knowledge to improve ethics.

Vignette 1– Reuven and The True Value of An Etrog

Reuven needed some extra money. So it was only natural that when his older brother's friend (who was learning in Kollel) asked him if he wanted to manage his etrog business for him, he jumped at the opportunity.

Since the owner of the business couldn't be around to oversee how hard Reuven was working, he decided to pay him a percentage of the total profits. This way, the more etrogs Reuven sold the more money they would both make!

When Reuven picked up the etrogs, there were three boxes. One contained etrogs of average quality. These were priced at \$50. The second box contained better quality etrogs and were priced at \$75. The etrogs in the third box were considered premium and sold for \$100. All of the etrogs were kosher, but to a trained eye there were important differences in appearance and quality among them.

Business was brisk and Reuven had no complaints. One day one of his customers was trying to decide which of the three kinds of etrogs to buy, and Reuven was pointing out why one was more expensive than the other. The customer decided to buy the premium etrog for a \$100 and carelessly put the other two etrogs down on the table with the premium ones. As Reuven was writing up the customer's order, a second customer came in and picked out the \$50 etrog that had been placed on the wrong table.

Reuven had a dilemma. The customer was willing to pay \$100 for an average quality etrog. Should he accept the higher price and not say anything or should he disclose the truth to the customer? Without thinking about it too much, Reuven took the money and kept silent.

Vignette 2–Shimon and The Collision on the FDR Drive

It was well passed midnight and Shimon was driving home alone after a night out with his friends. The movie had been funny and enjoyable, and the pizza was great as always. It was nice, Shimon thought to himself, not having to worry about school work and his part-time job for a few hours.

As his car made its way north up the FDR drive through a quiet mist, Shimon was relieved that there was almost no traffic tonight. As he was fidgeting with his car radio buttons, though, he suddenly noticed a man darting across the highway. He had come out of nowhere!

Shimon was an alert driver and managed to slow down and swerve away from the man, but his reactions were not quick enough. He hit him. Not with the front of his car and not at a high speed, but hard enough to knock the man down.

Shimon stopped the car but was afraid to get out. He was there long enough to see the man moving but not long enough to see if he could walk. Shimon put his car back in drive and clutching tightly to his steering wheel with both hands, he drove away.

Vignette 3—Levi and Drinking Beer in Fair Haven

Fair Haven is a typical suburban community with nice houses and well-manicured lawns. A few years ago, the Fair Haven Jewish Center, the community's largest synagogue, hosted more than a hundreds high school kids. The students came from three states in the region to celebrate Simchat Torah together.

On the afternoon of Simchat Torah, a large group of kids from the event gathered together at one of the homes. Unfortunately, the celebration got out of hand, and one of the boys who was staying at the house overdosed on a combination of beer and drugs and passed out. Just as the ambulance was leaving to rush the boy to the hospital, police arrived and arrested a group of teenagers.

The next Shabbat, the Rabbi of the Fair Haven Jewish Center spoke about the shame and disgrace that he felt, noting that it was the community's and his responsibility to make sure that something like this would never happen again. If news about this got out, Fair Haven's reputation would be soiled.

A year later, the Fair Haven Jewish Center was hosting a similar event. This time, though, the rabbi sent a letter to every family reminding them about last year's catastrophe and everyone's responsibility to make sure that history did not repeat itself.

At first, Levi didn't think much about the letter and what was happening in the synagogue. He was just excited about having his friends from school, camp, and past events coming to Fair Haven.

When he overheard some of his friends talking about who would be staying at their house this year, Levi responded, “Cool, that’s great.” But, Levi had an uneasy feeling about these boys. He knew them from camp and knew that they were both heavy beer drinkers and pot smokers.

Levi didn’t know what do. He felt like he should warn somebody about these two boys, but he didn’t want to blow his reputation at school as a “fun, cool, and popular kid.” He felt an obligation to the Fair Haven community, but he did not want to “snitch” on his friends either. “I’m supposed to have fun, I’m not expected to report this to the rabbi.”

After his mother reminded Levi about the rabbi’s letter, though, he began to think more seriously about his role in all of this. For sure, he personally was not going to take any drugs this year after what happened last year, but maybe he had to do even more.

As Levi continued to struggle with his dilemma, he realized “my reputation and my ego are less important than the reputation of my community and the synagogue as a whole.” He decided to tell the rabbi about the two boys who would be staying at his friends house.

In retrospect, Levi believes that in telling the rabbi, he did the right thing. In his words, “I now had the personality of a person who disregards his reputation and ego in the face of others.

What’s Driving Reuven, Shimon, and Levi

What can these vignettes teach us about our own motives? How can we use these stories to help us make better and wiser choices in the future? Let’s dig down below the surface here and see if we can figure out just what’s going on.

Let’s start with Reuven. His motives are pretty natural and probably among the most common. He’s selling a \$50 etrog for \$100 because he is driven by money and the things that money can buy. Simply put, he remains silent because he wants more of his customer’s money. You don’t have to be a brain surgeon to figure this one out.

If you think about it, money is an amazing invention. Though it is intrinsically worthless—just a piece of paper—it can be easily converted into so many other rewards. It also is unique in that unlike other needs where enough is enough (I just can’t eat another hot dog), with money, the more we have, the more we seem to want. Despite the fact that *pirkei avot* wisely warns us that “the more flesh, the more worms,” when it comes to money, we think more is always better!

The fact that Reuven happens to be selling etrogs of all things is really not relevant. From an ethical point of view, his dilemma would not have been any different had he been selling sport coats or sneakers. Although, I guess the fact that he is charging double the price for an etrog does make the story a little more ironic.

Shimon’s decision to leave the scene of his accident is a little different and obviously a lot more troublesome. He’s not motivated by money but by his need for safety. He’s scared and he wants

to get out of the situation as fast as he possibly can. He's not thinking about the person he hit, he's thinking about what's best for himself in the short run.

What Shimon probably does not realize is that if we understand safety and security not just as *physical* safety and *physical* security but as *psychological* safety, his quick decision to leave will probably never give him what he's really looking for. I imagine he is still haunted by his own behavior.

As we turn our focus to Levi, I think there is a difference in kind between his motives and Reuven's and Shimon's. He explicitly stated that he is acting for the community of Fair Haven and for the synagogue as a whole. If we take Levi at his word, what his story is saying is that one can move beyond a concern with physical needs and even one's own immediate self-interest.

The ability to do this, though, requires a degree of self-awareness, beyond what Reuven and Shimon demonstrated. Comparing the three cases, Levi is the only one who is weighing his options in a reasonable kind of way. He wants to keep his reputation as a "cool" kid, but he also wants to make sure that no one ends up in the hospital this year either. In part, this is due to the fact that he has more time to think about what to do, but it is also a function of his ethical awareness and his expanding concern for other people besides himself. One way of putting this is that Levi *has* interests, while Reuven and Shimon *are* their interests.

To the extent that almost everyone can relate to all three of these stories, it suggests that some needs or some motives are shared by everyone (or almost everyone). In fact, this is exactly what the psychologist Abraham Maslow believed and taught. He identified different kinds of needs including physiological (Reuven), safety (Shimon), and community needs (Levi).

In looking at how Maslow thought about needs together with Reuven, Shimon, and Levi's behavior, it appears, that there is a kind of hierarchy of needs. In many (if not most) situations, our instinct is to satisfy our most basic needs first. It is as if we are pre-wired to satisfy our physiological needs before anything else. In today's world, where money can be converted into just about anything, our default preference shows up, like in Reuven's choice, as, above all, a desire for money.

After our physiological needs are satisfied, our behavior is motivated by a need for security and safety. Maslow would easily understand even if he wouldn't agree with Shimon's unthinking and almost automatic reaction to flee the scene of his accident.

Finally, in those situations where we are no longer hungry or thirsty, and where we feel no external threats to our safety, the need to become a member of a community emerges. Of the three stories, Levi's reflects the most inclusive type of need.

Maslow went so far as to say that it was impossible for "higher level" needs to emerge before "lower level" needs were satisfied. He argued, for example, that a starving person, could think of nothing other than satisfying his hunger. I think it's incorrect to go this far, but I do think that anyone with the ambition of becoming a moral hero should give due respect to his or her

physiological and safety needs. This is not to say that one can not act for higher purposes even in the absence of adequate food and shelter, but one should recognize just how hard this is to accomplish in the real world. Minimally, one must recognize that there are tradeoffs that will need to be made. If Levi really cares about the welfare of his community, he has to make sacrifices.

One of the things that strikes me most about Levi's decision to go to the rabbi (especially when you contrast it to Reuven and Shimon's behavior), is his confidence in his own ability to affect the world in a positive way. This confidence is called self-efficacy and is a foundation for ethical behavior. Without the belief that what we do matters in a fundamental way, it is impossible to sustain enough drive to do the right thing.

Levi's choice was also, in part, a result of his ability to envision and imagine an alternative to last year's fiasco. He knows that there is often a delay between action and outcomes and his decision to go to the rabbi shows a mature patience.

Levi's ability to carefully reflect about his own behavior is testimony to his own strength of character but it is also a product of the environment and the positive role models like his mother and the rabbi.

Reuven and Shimon seem like they're acting in a free and uncoerced way. But, to the extent that neither one of them really thought about what they were doing, they are just reacting to their environments rather than creating them. I see them more like prisoners to their own instincts than truly free agents.

Conclusion

I retell Reuven, Shimon, and Levi's stories not because these three individuals are so different from you and me, but because in them I recognize more of myself. And, I hope that, with the help of a little imagination, through their stories you will come to understand your own stories better, as well.

Reuven, Shimon, and Levi, like the rest of us, are struggling to survive and thrive in a world that seems one moment to be cold, arbitrary, and unforgiving while the next moment it's warm, inviting, and hospitable. One minute a stranger darts out in front of our car showing us to be shallow and self-interested, but in the next minute we find the strength to care enough about our community to do something to help.

Most of the time, with a little effort on our part, a bit of help from our friends, and a lucky break or two, our ability to choose wisely develops over time.

The most fortunate among us, never stop growing. Natan Sharnasky's ability to defy the KGB was not merely the result of happenstance, but was the culmination of a life's journey. His life is remarkable for its intense passion and mindful decision-making.

In order to underscore the great potential of human motivation I close this chapter by quoting once again from Natan Sharansky's **Fear No Evil**. After realizing just how serious his situation was, Sharansky writes:

It was around this time that I composed a short prayer in my primitive Hebrew:...Blessed are You, Adonai, King of the Universe. Grant me the good fortune to live with my wife, my beloved Avital Sharon, in the Land of Israel. Grant my parents, my wife, and my whole family the strength to endure all hardships until we meet. Grant me the strength to endure all hardships until we meet. Grant me the strength, the power, the intelligence, the good fortune, and the patience to leave this jail to reach the land of Israel in an honest and worthy way." (P. 52)

It's easy to fall into the trap of more flesh—more worms, but it's not impossible to escape either.