

The Jewish Ethics Workbook: Chapter Eight

Respect

Let the honor of your fellow man be as precious to you as your own. (Avot: Chapter 2, Mishna 10)

What happens when we lose the human ability to honor and respect one another? How bad can things get?

I keep a newspaper article from the **Jerusalem Post** on my desk at school so that every student who comes into my office can read it. The article appeared in 1996, about a month before Yigal Amir's murder of Yitzhak Rabin. The title of the article is "They Will Share the Guilt."

The article, written by two Jewish writers associated with the Hartman Institute in Jerusalem, hints about the possibility of Rabin's assassination. In the article, the authors document the harsh and incendiary public statements of a prominent rabbi attacking Rabin's political policies, implying that Rabin, a former military hero of Israel, was now a traitor to the state.

The authors suggested, with deadly accuracy, that if and when Rabin is assassinated, it is precisely these leaders--who are undercutting the most basic premises of Israeli democracy--who will be to blame.

Re-reading this article with the advantage of 20-20 hindsight is uncomfortable and disturbing, but it also provides a powerful argument in favor of recognizing our responsibility to strengthen society's fragile democratic institutions and values. These values include respecting others, non-coercion, transparency, equal rights, freedom of expression, pluralism, compromise, individual and communal responsibility, and many others.

For those who still insist that Yigal Amir was a crazy young man acting alone, this article provides a powerful wake-up call. Amir did murder Rabin, but he did so in order to realize his teachers' anti-democratic ideals. In thinking back about what happened, one can easily trace the slippery slope from a basic lack of respect for a fellow human being (I disagree with your politics to you're a traitor) to his cold-blooded murder (you're dead).

Moral Decay

Rabin's assassination is a particularly severe symptom of moral decay in the Jewish community. Unfortunately, it is not the only symptom.

Consider the damage and loss of trust within and towards the Jewish community caused by the well-publicized Satmar School Scandal in Brooklyn, New York. According to the New York

Times and Jewish Week reports, after a five year investigation, the once well-respected, Rabbi Hertz Frankel, principal of the Beth Rachel school, pleaded guilty to felony charges involving no show teachers, fund diversions, false job titles, and clear breaches of separation of church and state.

Rabbi Frankel, with the help of high placed public school officials, designed an elaborate scheme to bilk the public school system out of \$6 million. Among other crimes, Rabbi Frankel provided the school district with lists of women with appropriate academic credentials to be put on the districts payroll. These teachers, though, never worked at the school. Rather school officials cashed the checks and used the money to pay other women-lacking the appropriate professional credentials—who were deemed by Rabbi Frankel to be better teachers and role models for his young students. The women, whose names were being inappropriately used, happily accepted this arrangement since they were able to use the health insurance benefits these jobs provided. Rabbi Frankel explained the ruse tersely, “We only want Satmar teachers for Satmar girls.”

On April 9, 1999, Rabbi Frankel was sentenced to three years unsupervised probation, and Beth Rachel had to pay a fine of \$1 million. Although a significant portion of the school district’s money remained unaccounted for, Rabbi Frankel and his attorney, Nat Lewin, claim that he was more a victim than a criminal, noting that Rabbi Frankel did not personally benefit from these activities and that three officials at the school district actually approved the scheme.

Even after entering his guilty plea, Rabbi Frankel seemed unapologetic. In a New York Times interview, Rabbi Frankel continued to insist publicly that “the ends justify the means,”-- his words not mine.

If Rabbi Frankel and his attorney were the only ones who held to this view it probably wouldn’t be worthwhile to spend too much time on this issue. Unfortunately, as we all know, the attitude that the ends justify the means is a well-accepted dictum in some quarters.

For example, just a few months after Rabbi Frankel pleaded guilty, in an unrelated incident, Rabbi Elimelech Naiman, a former deputy director of Brooklyn’s largest Jewish community council (COJO), was sentenced to two years in jail for misappropriating more than \$300,000 in government funds. Rabbi Naiman’s excuse is remarkably similar to Rabbi Frankel’s. He did not personally benefit from the misappropriated funds, but, his defenders argued, the monies were used for appropriate organizational ends (as if this makes everything okay).

In the real world, of course, it is impossible to completely separate the ends from the means. Justifying illegal and unethical actions in the name of some higher principle is the argument of last resort and is always symptomatic of a deeper problem. Means *are* ends, and ends *are always* means for other, more distant, ends.

Is There an Antidote to Moral Decay?

These three incidents document what happens as the concept of a binding morality loses its force; society unravels. I believe there is an antidote to the kind of moral decay described in the

above unfortunate incidents and it is embedded in Rabbi Eliezer's statement quoted at the beginning of this chapter. "Let the honor of your fellow man be as precious to you as your own." This seemingly simple prescription is a kind of moral minimum necessary for any community that aspires to call itself moral.

When Rabbi Frankel states that "the ends justify the means," he is demeaning and dehumanizing his fellow citizens from whom he has already stolen millions of dollars. He is saying, in effect, his own interests trump everyone else's. He believes this to such an extent that he thinks it's okay for him to steal in order to make sure his students are given what he thinks is the best possible education. This, of course, is the exact opposite of Rabbi Eliezer's prescription and hardly the legacy Rabbi Frankel himself would really want to leave to his students if he thought about it for very long.

Ironically, as Rabbi Frankel withholds his honor and respect from his fellow citizens, he dishonors and shows disrespect to himself and his own tradition even more! One of the lessons then from these kinds of stories is that it is impossible to disentangle one's own honor and respect from the honor and respect one shows to others. That's why in another Mishna, the Pirkei Avot teaches us in the name of Ben Zoma, "Who is honored? He who honors others" (Chapter 4, Mishna 1). Or, in Rabbi Frankel's case we might formulate this mishna in the negative, Who is dishonored? He who dishonors others.

But, how do we begin to learn how to honor and respect others in our everyday lives? The story that Josh told me provides a good example to consider.

Nathan's Secret

Josh is a 21 year-old college student who works most weekends as a counselor at a home for mentally disabled adults in Brooklyn. The home is run by a well-known state-funded Jewish agency. It is hard work, mentally and physically. Josh recently described it to me as follows:

The home in which I work consists of eight, older, high functioning Jewish males. On an average weekend, there are three counselors working. Our job is to help the clients go about their daily functions. We eat with them, help them shave, and make sure that they shower properly.

Josh is an intelligent and capable young man of high ideals and aspirations. Why has he decided to work in such a high pressure and no-glamour environment? It's certainly not for the working conditions, salary, or prestige. Josh works at this Jewish agency because he finds his work there meaningful and, as he puts it, "emotionally rewarding." Despite all of its difficulties, Josh loved his job working with mentally disabled men. In fact, his manager was considering retirement, and Josh had high hopes of replacing him in the not too distant future. As a young man with few family or financial obligations, he could afford a job, at least for the short term, where the pay was low but the psychological rewards were high.

Although Josh recalls that he was apprehensive when a new counselor was hired to work with

him, in a short time, Josh and the new hire, Nathan, were getting along quite well. Nathan was about the same age as Josh, and they quickly discovered that they both enjoyed some of the same hobbies like reading science fiction novels and skiing. They liked spending time together at work and joking around with each other whenever their job assignments allowed it. There were never those awkward silences where Josh or Nathan might feel uncomfortable with each other.

About a month after Nathan had started working at the home, Nathan was feeling more confident and self-assured. On Friday night, after completing their chores for the evening, Nathan and Josh began a lively conversation about their religious beliefs.

Both Josh and Nathan realized how their choice of work was strongly influenced by their shared heritage and upbringing. Josh and Nathan had both gone to Jewish day schools where *gemilut chasidim* (acts of loving kindness) were constantly emphasized as an essential and non-negotiable aspect of Judaism.

They also made the discovery that their parents shared a passion for philanthropy and were always trying to help out the least well-off members of society. Whenever someone in synagogue did not have a place to eat Shabbat dinner, Josh's parents would always invite them over. Nathan's parents were known best for their work in helping out recent Russian immigrants by finding them furniture and other daily necessities. If either of them had any complaint about their parents, it was that maybe sometimes they spent *too* much time helping others!

As this conversation continued into the early morning hours, it took an odd and unfamiliar turn. Suddenly, Nathan made what seemed like a strange observation to Josh. Here's how Josh described the discussion. "Nathan mentioned that a situation arose where he felt it necessary for his spiritual growth to desecrate Shabbat to take a subway to a specific *schul* [synagogue] in midtown to see how they *davened*."

Josh was baffled and confused by Nathan's remarks. Why would Nathan want to desecrate Shabbat? And, how would this help his spiritual development? Weren't there plenty of *schuls* in Brooklyn? What was so special about this particular synagogue in midtown Manhattan?

I had no idea what he was talking about and he tried to change the subject, but I pressed the issue. Finally, he confessed; the *schul* that he wanted to go to was a gay and lesbian *schul*. I was quite shocked. I suddenly felt a little weird about the massage that he had given me earlier.

Josh had never met a gay person before, and although it seemed strange to him at first to learn that Nathan was gay, he quickly "got used to working with Nathan." Josh was certainly surprised and caught off balance, but upon reflection, this news didn't really change his opinion much of Nathan. According to Josh, Nathan was still the same Nathan, and it certainly did not affect his ability to perform his job duties.

When Josh's boss heard that Nathan was gay from another counselor, though, he was upset and wanted to fire Nathan immediately. As Josh tells it,

The problem was that they had no reason to fire him for he was a good worker. If they got rid of him with no good reason he could sue the organization for discrimination and they could lose their government funding...My manager wanted me to lie and back up his claim that Nathan was lazy and took a lot of long breaks and generally shirked his responsibilities.

With so many leaders and role models in both the Jewish and non-Jewish worlds saying and acting as if the ends really do justify the means, it is no wonder that Josh felt so conflicted. On the one hand, he wanted his promotion and he knew that if he lied to help his boss, the manager's job would probably be his in the not too distant future. Besides, perhaps, Nathan *really was* a potential danger to the clients (or, was this just a rationalization?). On the other hand, Josh had come to appreciate Nathan and had grown fond of him. Again, in Josh's words, "I asked myself, what type of person am I? I am an honest God fearing Jew. What does such a person do in this situation?"

After some serious soul-searching, Josh realized that a God fearing Jew *doesn't lie and bring harm to others*. "So I chose not to do it. I told my manager that I just could not do it. He was quite annoyed and our relationship was never the same from then on."

In the end, Josh tells me, Nathan was fired anyway and Josh himself was passed over for the job promotion. "As for me," Josh says, "I feel content that I made the right decision. I believe that I am now a better person for it. I tested the principles for which I stand and reaffirmed them. I am stronger and now ready to face a new more difficult challenge."

As I think about Josh's tale, I can't help but contrast his attitude to Rabbi Frankel's. Josh simply does not accept the idea that the ends justify the means. In fact, Josh escapes Rabbi Frankel's ill fate because he continues to respect and honor Nathan as a fellow human being even after he learns that Nathan is not exactly who he originally thought he was. Despite the fundamental differences between them, Josh continues to see a precious dignity in Nathan's person.

Josh's story makes vivid the power and tension inherent in Rabbi Eliezer's statement. It's easy to show respect to those people who look and think just like you, the real moral challenge and contemporary need is to learn how to respect those people who aren't like you.

Josh's Secret

Respect and honor are the basic building blocks for all social groups, whether it be a married couple, a family, a synagogue, a city, a country, or even a "global community." Regardless of the size, every group requires its members to treat one another with basic human decency.

As I was writing this chapter, I took a break to pick up my daughter from school. Driving down to pick her up, I was stuck in an unusual traffic jam. Apparently, some time earlier in the afternoon someone had driven into the traffic light and knocked it over. As I finally passed through the intersection, I saw the traffic light lying on the ground. I couldn't help but think of

this damaged and broken traffic light as a metaphor for the loss of respect in a community. Without the traffic light, bedlam reigned. The first guy to the intersection wins!

We now know what Nathan's secret was, but what's Josh's secret? What is it that Josh knows that his boss has apparently forgotten? Here's a list of seven possibilities:

1-In order to respect someone else, you have to respect yourself first. Josh knew that if he caved into his bosses demand and lied about Nathan's job performance that he would not only be diminishing Nathan's dignity, but he would be harming himself, as well. It takes great confidence and self-assurance in your own beliefs and attitudes to stand up to someone like Josh's boss.

Where does this self-respect come from? In Josh's case it was probably his upbringing, his parents, his elementary and high school teachers, and his own emerging sense of identity. Josh is clearly a thinking person and someone who takes himself seriously.

2-In order to show respect, you may have to make a sacrifice. Or, as they say, "no pain--no gain." In Josh's case, he was willing to jeopardize his job promotion in order to help Nathan. This doesn't mean that Josh is worse off after the fact. In fact, Josh believes he's better off and he puts it plainly. "I believe that I am now a better person for it. I tested the principles for which I stand and reaffirmed them. I am stronger and now ready to face a new more difficult challenge."

3-Showing respect for someone else makes you respectable. I don't know a lot about Josh's boss. I've never met him, and I don't even know his real name. The one thing I can tell you about him, though, is that noone would think of featuring him in an ethics text book as an example of an ethical leader.

Josh, by contrast, *is* a quiet leader. In the end, he couldn't save Nathan's job and he didn't get his own promotion, but, in a small way, his example of courage and his strength of character make it easier for the rest of us to stand up for what we believe in. If Josh can do it, so can we.

4-You can't always look to an authority figure for ethical guidance. In Josh's case, it's the authority figure who puts him in his difficult situation to begin with. It's his boss who is asking him to lie to make it easier for him to fire Nathan.

Here's a thought experiment. Suppose Josh's identical twin brother was working in an identical home and was faced with an identical dilemma. But, unlike Josh, his twin decides to lie about Nathan saying that he doesn't show up to work on time and is delinquent in carrying out his chores. Suppose further that his brother defends his actions by stating that "well...it's okay. I'm just following orders. It's part of my job."

To me this would be a chilling defense, especially as I remember those infamous historical figures who used this exact logic to defend some of the most evil crimes in history.

In the end, what Josh's story shows in its quiet way is that ultimately each one of us is

responsible for his or her own actions. When it comes to ethics, we must necessarily take ownership of our own actions. So even though Josh was fortunate to have been brought up in a positive and nurturing environment, it is now his turn to stand up and decide what kind of person he's going to be.

5-Respect is not love. As I think about Josh's story, a few things jump out at me. First, Josh never socialized with Nathan outside of the work environment. Second, Josh makes no mention of staying in touch with Nathan after he was fired. Third, Josh doesn't justify his actions in terms of trying to help Nathan retain his position. His stated motivation is that he will not make up lies that will harm someone else...anybody else.

6-Respect is not approval. Nowhere in his description of what happened with Nathan does Josh explain his attitude about homosexuality. In a kind of nervous, humorous aside, he does say that he "felt kind of funny about the massage" that Nathan had given him earlier but Josh doesn't really seem to be too bothered by this.

I think the reason why Josh doesn't discuss his attitude about homosexuality as he discusses this situation is because he realizes that this would miss the entire point of his dilemma. To bring in the issue of homosexuality would be to mis-frame what is happening. In Josh's mind the ethical issue is black and white. His boss wants him to lie and he knows that this would be "bearing false witness." The difficulty for Josh was simply whether or not he "was strong enough to make that [the correct] choice."

To be able to maintain this distinction between respect and approval is not easy. So many of us become overly moralistic when we see someone doing something that we don't like. And, often times, these powerful feelings make us forget the respect that every human being is due.

7-Respect may not always be enough. Although, I think in Josh's case respect probably *was* enough. I think by simply refusing to lie Josh did what he had to do, and what he could reasonably be expected to do given these circumstances.

Nevertheless, it is worth raising the question of whether he could have done more here. Just how far does respect require us to go? Josh might have decided to be more proactive. For example, he might have warned his boss that he would defend Nathan if it ever came to that in court. Or, Josh might have tried to contact Nathan after he was fired and reassure him that he believed Nathan was doing a good job. Perhaps Josh could have discussed this issue with some of his co-workers. Josh might have taken Nathan's questions to him about going to the gay *schul* more seriously. As Josh tells the story, he never responded to these obviously painful questions.

I think the reason why respect may not always be enough is that it's such a fragile attitude to maintain. It's extremely difficult to continue to respect someone day after day in the absence of a deeper emotional attachment. If we respect someone without caring about them, it's way too easy to underestimate what respect really requires from us.

I know as a teacher that I have a special responsibility to respect everyone of my students,

regardless of my personal likes and dislikes. But, in the interest of full disclosure, I can tell you that it is infinitely easier to respect someone that you actually care about than someone you dislike. It is possible to respect someone without caring about them, but keep in mind that there is a danger in this, as well.

Conclusion

This chapter began with two questions. What happens when we lose the human ability to honor and respect one another? And, How bad can things get? According to Jewish tradition, pretty bad. The ancient rabbis believed that one of the reasons why the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed was because of *sinat chinam* (baseless hatred). If we understand this *sinat chinam* as an expression of a lack of human respect, the message here is a powerful one. Simply put, without mutual respect a community cannot keep it together. If so, we must continually ask ourselves, what is that respect entails?

It is easy to acknowledge from a purely intellectual viewpoint that every single one of us is created in God's image. This is why we are all equal. What is much more difficult is to live your everyday life mindful of this core belief. Does our daily behavior mirror our faith? Josh is just now learning how important this question can be.

