

The Jewish Ethics Workbook: Chapter Nine

Caring

*Make for yourself a friend and judge everyone charitably.
(Avot: Chapter 1, Mishnah 6)*

In the previous chapter, Josh provided an example of what it means to respect or to honor someone. One of the main reasons for discussing Josh' dilemma was to underscore the difficulty of implementing this principle in the real world. The difficulty is that ethics demands from us not only that we respect the people that are *most like us*, but it also requires us to respect people that are *different from us* in one way or another.

Josh's boss wanted him to lie about Nathan's ability to perform his work at the home. Josh may or may not have approved of Nathan's homosexuality—we don't know because Josh didn't feel this issue was relevant in this situation—but Josh was not willing to harm him even if it meant given up his job promotion. After all was said and done, Josh felt good that he had stood up to his boss. So, although its difficult to respect others it's not beyond our capabilities.

Respect is an antidote for moral decay. But respect alone may not always be enough. As philosophers like to say, it is a *necessary* condition for community but not a *sufficient* condition. Care, at its best, includes respect, but is something deeper and more inclusive.

In the dictionary, to respect someone is “to avoid harming” or “interfering” with him or her. To care for someone is “to like him or her” or “to feel affection.” Josh respected Nathan, but it is at best unclear if he cared about him (in this technical sense).

From a Jewish perspective, it would be an impossible morality that always expected everyone to like everyone else (respect is usually hard enough). Nevertheless, ethics does ask us to work hard and consistently at extinguishing our unjustified prejudices towards one another. This task requires much effort and a high degree of self-awareness and self-scrutiny. These are the kinds of prejudices that hold us hostage to unexamined and negative assumptions about whole classes of people (usually the kind of people that we meet only infrequently). What often makes this work so hard is how deeply ingrained some of these prejudices can be.

To the extent that your successful at this task of uncovering these unjustified negative attitude towards others, one can easily imagine respect blossoming into care and friendship. Joshua ben Perachiah taught “make for yourself a friend and judge everyone charitably.” I'd like to turn this Mishna around and interpret as follows: Judge everyone charitably (stop being prejudiced) and *this is exactly how* you will make for yourself a friend. As you'll see soon, this is what worked for Jon.

Jon's Fear

I've known Jon for a few years now. He's a good student. He's bright, friendly, and he works hard. This past summer, Jon worked as an intern at a brokerage firm in New York City.

Jon's assignment for the summer was to call potential investors and to interest them in a bond fund which, at the time, was paying pretty good interest rates. Jon, with his outgoing personality and pleasant speaking style, enjoyed the work despite its routine nature. He knew that he really didn't want to make "cold calls" for a living, but Jon felt that just being in a professional environment would help him no matter what he does after graduation. Besides, no matter how boring the work really was, he could talk it up when it came time to interview for a full-time position.

The firm that Jon was working at was going through a down cycle the summer he was there. This really didn't affect Jon too much. Actually, since the firm had just laid off a number of full-time employees, Jon got to share a pretty nice office with a couple of other interns. What was even better was that the two interns he shared the office with were good friends from college.

Jon and his friends attend Yeshiva University, a Jewish university that requires students to take a rigorous Judaic Studies program along with their secular courses.

The summer Jon was working at the brokerage firm, he and his friends were preoccupied by the horrible news coming out of Israel. It seemed that almost everyday there was news of another suicide bombing. Jon and his friends had all been to Israel just a few years before and all of them have friends and family who are still there. When Jon and his friends weren't on the telephone selling bonds they were usually discussing, debating, and arguing about what Israel could do. Jon couldn't fathom the "cruel and barbaric ways of the Muslims," as he put it to me. They talked incessantly about Israel and its problems, not that they thought they could really change Israeli or Palestinian policies, but Israel was what they cared about.

About a week into the summer, Jon's boss came in and introduced a new intern who would be sharing the office with him and his friends. The boss said, "meet the new intern – Mohamed – he will be assisting you with the project." Without missing a beat, an uncomfortable and self-conscious Mohamed asked his new co-workers to please call him Alan.

Jon describes his own reaction to this news as follows. "We all looked at each other in shock, we were not accustomed to working with Muslims as many sects of Muslims hate Jews. After a minute of silence I finally approached Alan and introduced myself."

Of course, another reason why Jon and his friends had never worked with a Muslim is that all three of the young men had attended Jewish day schools from kindergarten through high school, and were now attending a Jewish university. Given this, there really wasn't much opportunity to meet Christians, let alone Muslims!

"Working with the new intern produced an uncomfortable situation," to say the least. "Reading

all the articles and seeing all the pictures after every suicide bombing caused us to hate every Muslim even if we had not met them before. This made us dislike Alan from the moment he stepped into our office.”

From the time Alan started working with Jon and his friends, the animated political conversations which had so characterized the first week of work stopped immediately. The tiny community of Jon and his two friends was altered forever. With no warning, here was this unknown, strange, and exotic figure who had been thrust into their midst.

Jon and his friends trusted one another from day one. They shared a common heritage, a common background, and similar personal histories. They dressed alike, talked alike, and had many other mutual friends outside of the office. They didn't necessarily share all the same values and ideas—that's why their conversations during the first week were so interesting—but at the end of the day, they knew in their heart of hearts that they all belonged to the same “moral community.”

Despite differences, and even substantial differences in some cases, these three friends shared a deep and maybe even “spiritual” sense of connection. But, at what cost?

For sure, Jon and his friends tried not to mistreat Alan in anyway (translation: they tried to “respect” Alan). On the other hand, they did exclude Alan from their inside jokes, and he was left behind everyday at lunch to fend for himself. Simply put, Alan was not a member of their small work community.

Pangs of Guilt

Jon, though, began to feel pangs of guilt about how he was treating his brand new co-worker. At first, Jon tried to manage the guilt by “remembering all the suffering and pain the Muslims were causing to the Jews in Israel.” This strategy didn't work. As much as Jon feared Alan, he couldn't help but feel sorry for Alan, too. Perhaps Jon imagined himself as Alan. How would he like to be treated if the situation was reversed?

So Jon tried another tack. “I tried to think of reasons why Alan might be different than the Muslims that I had learned to hate. I conjectured that Alan was a non-religious Muslim and did not associate himself with the Muslim community.”

In other words, Jon wondered and hoped that perhaps Alan had cut himself off from his own community. To Jon, this would make it easier to begin to trust Alan and to be more open with him.

Interestingly, a close reading of Jon's statement shows that Jon himself knew that his hate for Muslims was not something that had originally come from inside of himself, but was something that he had picked up along the way, as he correctly put it, “I had learned to hate.” But, what one has learned, one can unlearn.

Jon's hope that Alan wasn't a real Muslim proved to be false. As the days went by, it became clear that Alan, like Jon, was a deeply religious person. He prayed five times a day and scrupulously observed the laws of Ramadan.

Jon's emotions though kept getting the best of him. Maybe he was remembering the same song that Natan Sharansky kept singing while he was locked away in the Gulag. "The entire world is a narrow bridge, and the important thing is not to be afraid at all." Despite Alan's religious practices and background, Jon still felt that he needed to go out of his way and be nice to Alan. He now argued with himself that Alan "was not a suicide bomber nor was he a part of the Muslim sects that act in evil ways." As he focused on this emerging insight and began to see Alan as a unique person with his own desires, fears, and hopes, Jon started to overcome his initial dislike of Alan.

During the early weeks of the summer, Jon was obviously torn between his love and devotion for the state of Israel and his obvious desire and obligation to respect a fellow worker, no matter what his culture and background might be.

Borrowing from the sociologist Philip Selznick's categories, Jon felt the tension between the differing pulls of piety and civility, although I doubt he would put it in these terms. Selznick writes, that "The norms of civility are impersonal, rational, and inclusive, whereas piety is personal, passionate, and particularist."

To me, piety seems to be the more natural and primitive instinct. I like the way the philosopher George Santayan described it. "Piety, in its nobler sense, may be said to mean man's reverent attachment to the sources of his being and the steadying of his life by that attachment."

Piety is more emotional than rational. One loves one's family and home, one's own people and its traditions. Piety is the humble recognition that your personality is rooted deeply in the happenstance of your background and upbringing. Everyone has a history that predates his own birth and conscious choices. It is human nature to identify with and accept with gratitude the gifts of one's community and its traditions.

By contrast, civility can be formally defined as "behavior befitting a citizen." Civility doesn't appear naturally, rather it is the end product of hard and sustained work. It is an acquired trait, rather than an inherited trait. Selznick describes civility as "moderation in pursuit of one's own interests, and concern for the common good. In civility, respect, not love, is the salient value."

Most importantly, for my purposes, the goal of civility is to enlarge and strengthen the moral community. It strives not for a parochial ethic restricted to insiders, but for a universal morality where the boundary between insiders and outsiders is finally wiped away.

Jon's love and deep loyalty to the State of Israel is part of the very definition of who Jon is.

Jon's attitude toward Alan, by contrast, is much more tentative and experimental. Jon's felt obligation to reach out to Alan reflects Jon's developing awareness of a world beyond the one he

has known since childhood. This other world is mysterious, unpredictable, and scary. Still, there is an attraction and a growing intellectual realization that despite the surface differences between Alan's world and his own, at a deeper and more fundamental level, the similarities between Alan and him are more profound, or at least, they might be.

As all of us soon realize, there is no roadmap to get us from piety to civility and home again. In many ways, it looks as though piety and civility contradict one another. The more one is attached to one's traditions the less likely one will be inclined to accept a universal morality. I think this is exactly what made Jon's decision so difficult for him.

On the one hand, Jon felt a tug to reach out to Alan and include him in his small work community. On the other hand, the last thing Jon wanted to do was to be disloyal to his own people and to himself. Might befriending a Muslim at a brokerage firm in New York City while Jews in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv are being blown up by Muslim suicide bombers be an act of betrayal?

Digging Deeper

As Jon continued to reflect on his situation, he dug deeper and deeper into his own religious and ethical tradition. What else can any of us do but continue to examine who one really is? This is one of the great lessons Natan Sharansky teaches us:

For the activist Jews of my generation, our movement represented the exact opposite of what our parents had gone through when they were young. But we saw what had happened to their dreams, and we understood that the path to liberation could not be found in denying our own roots while pursuing universal goals. *On the contrary: we had to deepen our commitment, because only he who understands his own identity and has already become a free person can work effectively for the human rights of others* (p. xxii, emphasis added, **Fear No Evil**, New York: Random House, 1988).

Paradoxically, the more carefully Jon thought about what it means to be an authentic Jew, the clearer and more vivid his obligation to Alan became. It turned out, at least for Jon last summer, that piety doesn't contradict civility but rather piety is the foundation of civility.

As Jon thought about his predicament, he told me about the ancient story of Shimon ben Shetach, a rabbi who lived about 2,000 years ago. It happened once that the students of Shimon ben Shetach purchased donkey for him from an Arab. On the way back to Shimon ben Shetach, the students found an expensive pearl buried in the donkey's saddle bag. Upon reaching their teacher, the students told Shimon ben Shetach the good news. "Your are a wealthy man now, teacher, and you don't have to work for a living anymore, but can devote yourself full time to the study of Torah." Shimon ben Shetach looked at his students and said "what kind of person do you think I am?" "But," his students said, "everyone agrees that if you find a lost object belonging to a heathen you may keep it." Shimon ben Shetach was unmoved by this argument. "I would rather return the pearl to the heathen and have him bless God than have all the riches in the world."

As Jon explained it to me, Shimon ben Shetach's story shows that religion is not just about following the rules, but it provides us "models of aspirations," as well. Nobody told Shimon ben Shetach that he had to return the pearl, he just knew it was the right thing to do.

Jon finally decided that the Jewish concept of *Kiddush Hashem*, usually translated as the sanctification of God's name, was appropriate for his situation with Alan.

I began to think that maybe we should go out of our way to be nice to Alan by including him into our conversations and inviting him to eat lunch with us. Instead of ignoring Alan, which made us seem unfriendly to people who were not like us. I thought that going out of our way to be nice to him would create a big *Kiddush Hashem*. To create a *Kiddush Hashem* is one of the most precious things a Jew can do.

I began to realize that not all Muslims are associated with evil acts. I began by helping him with his job and I began to have some personal conversations with him. We discussed our backgrounds, families, hobbies, and goals in life. By the end of the summer, we became very friendly even though he was a religious Muslim and I was a religious Jew.

I would like to suggest to Jon, perhaps, it wasn't *in spite* of their religion that they became friends but it was *because* of their religion that they became friends. The story Jon tells about his own deliberations and thought processes would suggest that this is the case. Of course, we don't know what motivated Alan throughout this whole ordeal, but I would guess that he felt some of the exact same tension and confusions that Jon was feeling. And, perhaps he too allowed himself to become friendly with Jon for some of the same kinds of reasons—although no doubt formulated in a very different religious vocabulary.

Jon told me that he now thinks the business world "is one of the best places to create this *Kiddush Hashem*. This can be done in many different way and each person must find his way of accomplishing a *Kiddush Hashem* in the business world."

A pure secularist might suggest that we need to keep a strict separation of religion and business. She might argue that the civility, tolerance, and acceptance that is required in the modern pluralistic organization demands adherence to a universal code of ethics independent of one's parochial interests and backgrounds.

If this is the case, I think the secularist is asking for the impossible. A universal code of ethics can only exist if there already exists a universal moral community. To create this moral community requires that all of us start from where we are. Universal ethics is not something that comes from the top down, rather it is built—piece by piece—from the bottom up.

This is not to suggest that secularists must adopt a religious vocabulary like Jon or Alan in order to participate in this process. Just as a religious person needs to go back home again in order to participate fully in the broader society, so too a secular person needs to examine her own roots

and sources of morality, whether they be philosophical, literary, or even scientific.

Will Jon and Alan's friendship survive even more bombings and bloodshed? Noone can no. This will be up to Jon and Alan and how they decide to read and interpret their respective traditions. I think that Jon's final insight that "each person must find his way," should be a guiding light here.

How do we build and enlarge the moral community? Through hit and miss, Jon and Alan figured out a secret...one person at a time. And, how do we strengthen our own resolve to participate in this process? Perhaps the very first step is to enlarge and improve our own conceptions of our own identities. To go two steps forward, we need to go one step back. Maybe while Jon and Alan were learning how to sell bonds they were also learning something much more profound about themselves and about what it means to help build community.

Conclusion

I love Jon's story because it is such a hopeful one. To me it beautifully captures Joshua ben Perachiah's *mishna*: "make for yourself a friend and judge everyone charitably."

It turns out that these are not two distinct statements but a set of directions. Judge everyone charitably (stop being prejudiced) and *this is exactly how* you will make for yourself a friend. Jon overcame his initial prejudices against Alan and *this is exactly how* Alan became his friend. Jon accomplished this not by betraying his tradition, but by more fully understanding what it means to be Jewish.