

Jewish Virtue Ethics: Finding Goodness in a Complicated World

R. Suzie Jacobson, YK 5784

Do you ever wonder what existed before this universe? Darkness? Chaos? Nothingness? There is a whole sub-genre of midrash that imagines God sort of piddling around an empty universe, bored and yearning for more stimulation.

In a particularly beautiful midrash found in *Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer*, God sits alone before the world's creation imagining what might be possible.

Bored and lonely, God comes up with the idea to create a world. Like any good architect, God starts by drawing up the blueprints. But no matter what God designs, the world just doesn't make sense. The mountains and forests are beautiful and lush, the creatures in the oceans and skies, and covering the earth are varied and amazing. But the world just doesn't work- something is missing and God is frustrated - לא היה עומד - the world does not stand.

The midrash uses a parable - There is a ruler who wants to build a palace. However, no matter how beautifully the banquet halls and throne rooms are designed, the palace cannot be built until the ruler designs the entrances and exits. Once the ruler creates a way to enter and exit their palace, they can finally set the cornerstone of their home.

Our midrash teaches that it was the same for God. The world could not be created until God designed life's doorways - So God created Teshuva, repentance, our process of returning to the right path.

A world without teshuva is like a building without an entrance or exit. Teshuvah is our entrance, our pathway to change and our ability to live our lives with goodness and strengthened values. Teshuvah is also our exit, our way out of destructive or harmful behaviors and ways of being that keep us from living full and meaningful lives.

But how do we know what is broken and what needs to be fixed? Even more pressingly, how do we know what is right and good? Teshuva might be our exit and our entrance - our way out and our way back - but how do we know which door to take, which mistake to correct, which direction to follow?

We live in a world where good and bad are never black and white. It's a whole world of gray. We have so much information at our fingertips but it's difficult to trust what is real and true. Everyone thinks they are a pundit. Confirmation bias is real. There are shouting matches across the political aisle, there are shouting matches at PTA meetings. And everyone claims to have the capital T Truth. Especially when it comes to finding the moral path.

Modern ethics is a minefield of disagreement. Part of the problem is that with the enlightenment came the notion that through ration and scientific thinking, we could find all our answers.

In his 1981 seminal work "After Virtue,"¹ philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre lays waste to the history of Enlightenment moral philosophy. MacIntyre claims that the root of the problem is that these thinkers focused their energies on defining what is capital G Good - what is the right action, what is the right moral decision.

Normative ethics typically fall into two categories - Deontology and consequentialism - both doomed to fail.

Deontology emphasizes that we must follow ethical rules, and if we do so, that will lead to a moral life. Immanuel Kant believed that humans possess the ability to reason and understand universal moral laws. The problem is, rationality does not lead every human being to the same moral conclusions. We don't experience things in a vacuum so we will necessarily apply rules differently. And let's be honest - lots of us have a problem with authority.

Most humans will agree with the blanket statement that murder is wrong, but can we even agree on a definition of "murder?"- What about wars fought to protect the innocent or in self defense - like the one fought by Ukraine? What about the death penalty given to Robert Bowers for his horrific attack on the Tree of Life synagogue? What about the termination of a pregnancy? In this room we definitely disagree on which of these constitute murder, and if we were to move beyond this room, we would undoubtedly find further controversy. So how can we say that we can rationalize our way to the same moral conclusions?

¹ MacIntyre, Alasdair. *After virtue: A study in moral theory*. Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame, 2022.

The second giant of normative ethics is consequentialism which bases moral decision making on the intended consequences of our actions.

We are never quite sure of the results of our actions - we can't see the future! Intentions are nice, but to be moral we must care about our impact. So making choices based solely on intention is incomplete at best.

Post-modernism only further muddied the waters.

Ethicists who follow emotivism believe that when we say that something is "good" we are really saying - "I like that!" This is moral relativism, a dangerous proposition. It prioritizes the individual with no concern for the other. Simplified: it's rationalizing your choice and desires over all others in the name of "the good."

I could go on smashing ethical theories all day, but this isn't intro to ethics, or an episode of *The Good Place* - but you get the picture. In a world full of complexity and paradox, philosophy has struggled to articulate an ethical theory, let alone moral truth. Where does this leave the rest of us?

If we want our teshuva to help us live better lives - to show us where and how to return - how do we know what to focus on?

The problem with modern ethics is that by focusing on moral action, it doesn't take into consideration the moral actor. It doesn't see each of us - our particular lives, the communities we interact with, the complexity of managing dozens of competing interests in every moment. It's hard to take that all in.

When we make a moral choice, we bring with us dizzying complexities - we must care for our health, provide for our families, responsibly succeed in our work, connect with and honor our traditions, respect the dignity of the stranger, etc etc. It's a lot to balance.

Morality is not judged by one decision and teshuva is not achieved by fixing one wrong. It is the transformation of the self. It's the cultivation of our values and the development of our personal character to prepare us for whatever life has in store for us.

In philosophical circles this is called virtue ethics. It's not a new concept. In the West, it goes back to Plato and Aristotle; in the East, Mencius and Confucius. But guess what? It's also very Jewish.

Virtue is the honing of our values and bringing them into practice. This is how we develop our character. According to Aristotle, it takes time and training to form habits of virtue. 10,000 hours if you will. He called this the golden mean - through experience we can learn generosity by finding balance between stinginess and extravagance. There's that word again: balance. We learn confidence when we balance insecurity with arrogance. Cultivating our virtues takes practice and in time, it prepares us for life's complexities. As the theologian and ethicist Stanley Hauerwas notes, "the virtuous life is not premised on the assumption that we can avoid the morally onerous; rather, if we are virtuous, we can deal with the onerous on our terms"² Simply put: being virtuous makes the bad stuff more manageable.

And none of us are perfect - we each have our blind spots. Someone honest and kind in most situations may feel cranky and be rude to the cashier in the grocery store. Virtue ethics takes practice, self awareness, and it requires community. For the Jew, it calls upon each of us to recognize that we live within the context of a covenantal community focused on the search for meaning, goodness, and holiness.

In Deuteronomy, Moses tells the people: "... When you keep the commandments of Adonai your God v'halakhta beedrachav and walk in God's ways, Adonai will establish you to be a people holy to God"³

הלכת בדרכיו:

To walk in God's ways - Imitatio Dei.

The great Rabbi Maimonides, himself an Aristotelian, teaches - "We are commanded to walk in these intermediate paths - and they are good and straight paths - as Deuteronomy states: "you shall walk in God's ways."⁴

Maimonides continues -

² Hauerwas, Stanley. *A community of character*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991. 115-16.

³ Deuteronomy 28:9

⁴ Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah - Human Disposition* 1:5-6. Also see Talmud Bavli Sotah 14a and Talmud Bavli Shabbat 133b

“Just as God is called "Gracious," you shall be gracious;
Just as God is called "Merciful," you shall be merciful;
Just as God is called "Holy," you shall be holy;
A person is obligated to accustom himself to these paths and [to try to] resemble God to the extent of his ability.”

Maimonides prefers the giving of a thousand coins to different paupers to the giving of a thousand coins to one person, as the repeated acts of charity have a greater impact on the personality of the giver. Practice makes us almost perfect. That’s virtue. Through repeated actions, we learn to walk in God’s ways.

When we say we want to teach our children Jewish values, this is the goal. Being human means being flawed and imperfect — Jewish virtue ethics is the project of mastering the human so that humanity can approach divinity. As Rabbi Alan Mittleman taught: “Humans are to become holy, as God is holy. Human potential holiness will always be distant from divine actual holiness. But the tradition aims at something more than happiness as the final end of ethical striving.”⁵

We search to not only do good, but to *be* good and for our lives and community to be infused with goodness and holiness.

But how do we actualize this? Virtue ethicists like Alisdair MacIntyre believed that the way to develop virtues and strengthen our personal character is to find ourselves within a community of people committed to the same values. A community engaged in a constant and flexible conversation on how to live an ethical life.

Look around you, we have that going for us. Every Jew is part of the brit - the covenant that mythologically stretches back to Abraham and brings us together as a community to this day. We are steeped in a particular history, rooted to our stories, guided by ritual and law, and challenged to enter into a constantly shifting conversation about what it means to live an ethical life. Through our engagement, our character is molded by the values of our tradition and community, which allows us to respond to difficult moral dilemmas as they arise.

⁵ Mittleman, Alan. “Afterward.” Essay. In *Jewish Virtue Ethics*, edited by Geoffrey D. Claussen, 632–33. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2023.

Scholar Martha Nussbaum argues for the use of narrative in ethics because abstract philosophy misses the nitty gritty of the moral situation. For this reason, she appeals to literature... suggesting that "the novel can be a paradigm of moral activity."⁶

As Jews, we have something better than one novel, we have the Torah. Unlike the Greek epics, the Torah is not filled with tales of warriors and heroes - instead we have stories of fallible human beings who make mistakes and have messy families. They argue with God and learn new things. They live in a complicated world, much like our own. When we read the Torah, we don't read a self-help book. Instead, we are challenged to enter into a conversation about how to navigate life. And best of all, we are encouraged to disagree. The rabbis rooted their civilization in the concept of *machloket shel shamayim* - argumentation for the sake of heaven. When we read Torah together and engage in friendly disagreement, we learn how to navigate our own complicated moral quandaries.

From Torah and the two thousand plus years of meaningful debate that followed, we have Halakhah - Jewish practice and law. *Halakhta beedrachav* - In order to walk in God's ways, Jews formulate *halakha*, which literally means "the way to walk." Halakha is always changing. In every generation, rabbis and leaders make new halakhic decisions, reflecting the ever changing social, political, technological, and moral climate of our time while providing normative guidelines for life. All too often, Reform Jews believe that Halakha, Jewish law, is relegated to the observant or Orthodox. But our practices, rituals, and moral standards are also halakha - rooted in Jewish texts, given form through meaningful debate, and reflecting how we understand God and holiness. This, right here, your presence right now, is halakhic. It's not something for someone else. It's for you too.

Rabbi Soleveitchik famously and repeatedly argued that ethics cannot be reduced to formal rules. Halakha is not an ethical handbook - We aren't Kantians looking to our God for the answer to every moral question. Instead, our engagement with halakha leads to the cultivation of intuitive moral faculties which allow us to make decisions and respond to whatever life throws our way.

What teshuva, what meaningful change do we seek this Yom Kippur?

Is there someone with whom you have a difficult relationship? Did you say something you regret? Do you wish you hadn't yelled at your children or ignored your spouse when they needed you?

⁶ Martha Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 148.

True teshuvah is not the erasure or the fixing of any of these singular actions. It's not a do-over, a confession to obtain a blank slate. Teshuvah is the cultivation of a life where we seek harmony in our relationships, attentiveness to our loved ones, humility in the face of uncertainty, bravery in the face of challenge, and balance amongst all the many competing priorities. Teshuvah is the recognition that we are capable of growth, that our values can be strengthened, our virtues and character refined as we constantly seek justice, holiness, and peace. Teshuvah is not a destination; it's a process - it's the door we enter and exit and enter again.

Despite being called the day of repentance, Yom Kippur is not a painful day of beating ourselves for our many inadequacies. It is a deeply hopeful day of imagining who we might become. Life is lonely when we are left to navigate all the moral complexities of human society as individuals. But in Judaism we are never alone. We are blessed to be a part of a tradition and a community that never claims to have all the right answers, but it does guarantee that we will be together as we learn to live good and meaningful lives.

May this Yom Kippur be an opportunity to direct our minds and hearts towards our most precious Jewish values - and may we believe in our capacity to strengthen our character and live lives of virtue, justice and goodness.