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# NARRATIVE, IDENTITY, AND JEWISH ETHICS

In an article on Islam, Huston Smith, a distinguished authority on comparative religion, comments on the peripheral role played by narrative in the Koran. While historical facts are included in the Koran, these merely function as reference points and are presented in an abbreviated and dry manner. Smith writes that, from an Islamic perspective, the prevalence of narrative in Jewish and Christian Scripture make them "seem more distant from God for placing religious meaning in reports of events instead of God's direct pronouncements."[1]

The assumption that religious text should consist of direct Divine instruction and questioning the relevance of narrative will be familiar to many readers. As is well known, Rashi opens his commentary to the Torah by quoting Rabbi Yitshak who questions why the Torah – a book of religious instruction – does not begin with the first mitsva given to the Israelites.

The importance of direct Divine instruction notwithstanding, stories are a prevalent and prominent feature of Tanakh, with three quarters of the Hebrew Bible comprised of historical narratives.[2]

The importance of Jewish narrative is by no means confined to the Biblical text. Indeed, the historical-biographical information contained in Aggada provides valuable material for the development of a Torah worldview. The Sages themselves presented the learning of Aggada as a means to understanding the will of God: "'Do what is right in His eyes' – this refers to worthy aggadot."[3] As Yitzkhak Heinemann has observed, the Sages typically express their perspectives through presenting concrete stories rather than explicating theoretical ideas.[4]

[1] Huston Smith, "The Qur'an, Introduction," in *God's Breath: Sacred Scriptures of the World*, ed. John Miller and Aaron Kenedi (Boston: Da Capo Press, 1999), 397.

[2] See Jonathan Sacks, "History and Memory," accessed 27 June 2016, http://www.jewishpress.com/indepth/front-page/history-and-memory/2015/03/25/ (2015).

[3] *Mekhilta* on Exodus 15:26. See also Maharsha, introduction to *Hidushei Halakhot*.

[4] Yitzkhak Heinemann, *Darkei ha-Aggadah* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1974), 15. See also Moshe Simon-Shoshan, *Stories of the Law: Narrative Discourse and the Construction of Authority in the Mishnah* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).



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The stylistic composition of the Koran notwithstanding, the use of narrative in teaching moral principles is hardly unique to Torah literature. To cite one prominent example, the Greeks wove story, morals, and religion together into drama. As Kevin Ryan, an authority in moral education, has observed, “the stories handed down from generation to generation, from epoch to epoch, carried the human experience, the fruits of what the species had learned. For most of recorded history, stories were the dominant means of education.”[5]

Moreover, a simple discussion of the prevalence of stories in Torah literature overlooks the distinctive significance of the Judaic understanding of narrative. Among the distinguishing characteristics of Biblical and Rabbinic literature is the integration of law and narrative within the text. While most legal works do not contain narrative and most works of narrative do not include law, in both the Bible and the Talmud (as well as some Midrashic texts) the two genres overlap.

A more salient feature of Torah narrative is its historical emphasis. As Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi has observed, “only in Israel and nowhere else is the injunction to remember felt as a religious imperative to an entire people.”[6] The import of history from a Biblical perspective is anchored in a particular understanding of time as an arena of change. Historian of religion Mircea Eliade has contrasted the common ancient conception of history as a world of eternal recurrences with that of the Hebrew Bible in which time is understood as linear in the sense that is moving toward a destination that is radically unlike the past.[7]

## HALAKHA’S GAPS AND HOW NARRATIVE FILLS THEM

In a shiur at Gateshead Kollel in 1942, Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler presented the thesis that a Jew can observe all the laws of the *Shulhan Arukh* and still only reach “the aleph of Judaism.” Although the lecture provoked heated discussion among his students,[8] the notion that Jewish norms

[5] K. Ryan, “The Narrative and the Moral,” *The Clearing House* 64 (1991): 316-319.

[6] Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1982), 9.

[7] Mircea Eliade, *Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return* (New York: Harper, 1959). The revolutionary nature of this understanding of time has been noted by many other scholars from a range of disciplines. See, for example, J.H. Plumb, *The Death of the Past* (Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1973), 56-7 and Willis Glover, *Biblical Origins of Modern Secular Culture* (Mercer University Press, 1985), 181.

[8] *Strive for Truth*, Vol. 2 (New York: Feldheim, 1985), 86.

cannot simply be equated with the observance of halakha has been noted by many great Torah authorities.[9]

According to some, halakha cannot stipulate exactly how to behave in every situation because the variety of possible scenarios is too great. Hence, Ramban, in his commentary to the verse "you shall do what is upright and good in the eyes of God" (Deut. 6:18), explains "that it is impossible for the Torah to enumerate all of a person's interactions with his neighbors and friends, and also all his business affairs, community matters, and politics."

Ramban's understanding is that halakha cannot define the Jewish normative position for every conceivable situation. The application of moral principles can lead to different conclusions depending on the subtleties of the case.[10]

Another reason why Jewish norms cannot be fully defined in halakha is that different standards of behavior are expected of individuals based on their spiritual opportunities and stature. In explaining why halakha does not provide detailed instructions as to how to fulfil the Torah imperatives of "do what is upright and good in the eyes of Hashem" and "you shall be holy," the Maggid Mishna writes: "Because the mitsvot of the Torah apply in all times, in every period and under all circumstances, whereas the characteristics and behavior of man vary, depending on the time and the individual."[11]

The Maggid Mishna explains that halakha does not always impose a single standard because moral expectations can vary from person to person but he does not explicate why that should be so. An indication of the underlying principle is found in a discussion between Rabbi Elazar ben Parta and Rabbi Hanina ben Teradion as recorded in *Avoda Zara* 17b. R. Chanina says that R. Elazar will be spared by the Romans but that he, R. Hanina, would not. He provides a reason for this prediction, claiming

[9] This contention requires clarification. As Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein has explained ("Does Judaism Recognize an Ethic Independent of Halakhah," *Leaves of Faith: The World of Jewish Living* (Jersey City, NJ: Ktav, 2004), 2:50-52), in contemporary usage, the term "halakha" tends to refer to all the requirements expected of one bound by halakhic Judaism. In contrast, the Sages use the term in a more restrictive sense to refer to specific rules. Our contention in this article, as in R. Lichtenstein's analysis, is that Judaic norms require more than just compliance with specified prohibitions and obligations. It is through narrative that we understand many of the norms which are not explicated in halakhic texts.

[10] See similarly *Sefer ha-Hinukh* 338, Rabbi Yeshayahu Horowitz as cited below, and Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin, *Ha'amek Davar* to Shemot 19:6. Cf. Yosef Albo, *Sefer ha-Ikkarim* 3:23.

[11] *Maggid Mishna, Hilkhot Shekheinim* 14:5.

that "You have engaged both in Torah and in hesed, while I have devoted myself to Torah exclusively." In the continuation of the Talmudic passage, it is clarified that R. Hanina was indeed actively engaged in gemilut hasadim. His apparent claim to the contrary merely professed that he failed to practice kindness at the level which was requisite for a person of his stature.

It is clear from this passage that an individual Jew's normative responsibilities extend beyond compliance with halakha. R. Hanina was certainly observant of Torah law and showed a measure of dedication to acts of kindness. His explicit understanding, however, is that more was expected of him and that the degree of expectation varies with the stature of the individual. From these sources, we see that halakha does not stipulate all of a Jew's normative responsibilities because these norms vary depending on the stature and capabilities of the individual.

A third understanding as to why halakha does not explicate a comprehensive account of Judaic norms is articulated by Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak Kook. R. Kook writes that if there were a specific mitzvah for every ethical requirement, this would undermine ethics as it would exclude the possibility of voluntary ethical choices.[12]

For R. Kook, the observance of halakha is not the only motivation for ethical behavior. To behave morally only in order to comply with halakhic requirements leaves one ethically deficient. This is because a Jew is expected to develop certain character traits and such characteristics generally dispose one toward ethical behavior, even in the absence of Divine command. Indeed, R. Kook himself advances this approach with regard to the trait of compassion: "The love of people must break out from the source of compassion; it must come to us not as a prescribed statute. Otherwise it will lose its most luminous element. It must come as a spontaneous movement of an inner soul force."[13]

That the development of certain character traits is not explicated in halakha is famously recognized and discussed by Rabbi Chaim Vital. R. Vital understands the omission in terms of good character traits being a prerequisite for, rather than a component of, Torah.[14] We can add to this

[12] *Iggerot ha-Ra'ayah*, Vol. 1, letter 89.

[13] *Orot Ha-Kodesh* 3:318. The translation is from *Abraham Isaac Kook – The Lights of Penitence, The Moral Principles, Lights of Holiness, Essays, Letters and Poems*, trans. Ben Zion Bokser (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1978), 238. See also Rambam, *Hilkhot Teshuva* 7:3 and the discussion in Aharon Lichtenstein, *By His Light: Character and Values in the Service of God*, ed. Reuven Ziegler (Jersey City, NJ: Ktav, 2003), 203.

[14] *Sha'arei Kedusha* 1:2. Cf. *Perush ha-Gra*, Esther 10:3.

that the process of character development is a lifelong enterprise and does not lend itself to a defined, universal halakhic methodology.[15]

While R. Kook, in the quoted passage from *Iggerot ha-Ra'ayah*, explains why certain ethical responsibilities are not codified in halakha, the underlying philosophy is also of significance for developing the appropriate attitude toward halakhic observance. If Divine (or Rabbinic) command is not the only motivation for keeping mitsvot, it is important to be sensitive to the other motivating factors. In addition to the expression of appropriate character traits, halakhic observance should also be stimulated by an understanding of what the particular mitzvah and a life of mitzvah observance in general is meant to achieve.[16] Knowledge of halakha per se, without broader philosophical reflection, does not suffice to provide an understanding of the goals of halakhic life or of the character traits which form its foundation.

We have given four reasons for the limitations of halakha as an account of Judaic norms: the impossibility of specifying legislation for every conceivable scenario, the different application of norms depending on the stature and nature of each individual, the lack of halakhic stipulation regarding character development, and the need to contextualize halakhic observance within an understanding of its goals. Having recognized these limitations, we will discuss the potency of narrative in these areas.

Social cognitive neuroscience research has shown that our capacity for empathy and charitable giving is stimulated when we are presented with a poignant image or story.[17] This can be better understood in the context of a phenomenon that psychologists term "moral elevation." Moral elevation is an uplifting feeling that arises whenever individuals witness or hear about acts that epitomize moral virtue, such as kindness, compassion, understanding, and forgiveness.[18] The effect of this sensation is that, after witnessing and hearing such accounts, people

[15] See Lichtenstein, *By His Light*, 210.

[16] For support for this contention, see Rambam, Hilkhot *Mattnot Aniyim* 10:1. Cf. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Man of Faith in the Modern World: Reflections of the Rav* (Jersey City, NJ: Ktav, 1989), 1:94.

[17] Similarly, Ryan explains the moral potency of narrative in terms of its stimulating not only the mind but also the heart.

[18] J. Haidt, "The Positive Emotion of Elevation," *Prevention and Treatment* 3 (2000): 1-5. J. Haidt, S. Algoe, Z. Meijer, A. Tam & E. C. Chandler, "The elevation-altruism hypothesis: Evidence for a new prosocial emotion" (Unpublished manuscript, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, 2000).

tend toward altruistic and helpful behavior[19] and aspire toward moral excellence.[20]

The sensitivity developed through exposure to stories can guide the individual in ethical decision making in different situations which are not clearly defined in halakhic texts.[21] Similarly, the resonance and inspiration experienced in the encounter with such texts can play an important role in a person's recognition of his personal calling. Finally, while character development is obviously a more complex process than reading stories, the emotional impact of narrative indicates its potency in the evolution of ethically important sensitivities.[22]

The moral potency of narrative extends beyond the emotional sphere. For all the value of theological and philosophical study and reflection, stories exemplify the ways in which ideas can be applied in life. As Ryan explains, "stories make abstractions come alive" and "give meaning to terms such as a good life, selfishness, kindness and courage."[23] Moreover, stories are generally about people with whom the reader can identify and relate and this allows him to compare his or her own moral behavior to that of the characters in the narrative.[24] This process of sensitization to moral values and understanding how they can be applied in life leads to a deepened understanding of how Jewish norms should guide ethical conduct, even in cases where halakha does not stipulate the correct behavior. It is precisely because Jewish ethics is so concerned with the application

[19] S. Schnall, J. Roper, and D. M. T. Fessier, "Elevation leads to altruistic behavior," *Psychological Science* 21 (2010): 315-320.

[20] D. Freeman, K. Aquino, and B. McFerran, "Overcoming beneficiary race as an impediment to charitable donations: Social dominance orientation, the experience of moral elevation, and donation behavior," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 35 (2009): 72-94 and Haidt, "The Positive Emotion of Elevation."

[21] See Harry Stack Sullivan, *The Interpersonal Theory of Psychiatry* (New York: Norton, 1953), 219-220, who explains that stories allow children to deepen their understanding of human nature and the human situation.

This feature of narrative has been elucidated more recently by Martha Nussbaum who contends that judges should read novels to develop a human understanding of the defendant, gained through the exercise of imaginative identification in Martha Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life* (Boston: Beacon, 1995).

[22] See Sullivan who explains that stories transmit "certain of the cultural prescriptions to the child" leading to a "more rapid transition in the personification of the child than would occur simply from play and maturation and so on."

For more on the affective impact of storytelling in Jewish education, see Peninnah Schram, "Storytelling: Putting the Oral Tradition Back into the Classroom," *Jewish Educational Leadership* 3:1 (Fall 2004).

[23] "The Narrative and the Moral," 317.

[24] See Ryan.

of moral principles in varied, particular situations that Torah narrative is so effective a source of its ethical wisdom. By contrast, narratives about particular people in their ethical life would be a highly inappropriate means of communicating Plato's understanding of ethics as Platonic theory aims to generalize as much as possible.

A powerful Biblical indication of this use of narrative can be found in the contrast between Abraham and Noah. There is a view in the Midrash Tanhuma, quoted by Rashi, that if Noah had lived in a righteous generation, he would have become a much greater person (Rashi to Genesis 6:9). This, in itself, demonstrates the impact of exposure to exemplars of moral excellence but, particularly interesting, are the actual contrasts between Noah and Abraham in the Torah. The dominant characteristic expressed by Noah is that of obedience to the word of God, his compliance being noted four times in the narrative (Genesis 6:22, 7:5, 7:9, and 7:16). While Abraham shows no less commitment to obedience of Divine decrees (the Akeida is only the most definitive example of such commitment), he also demonstrates a sensitivity to overarching principles and their application. Hence, Abraham challenges God's decision to destroy Sodom, not out of a sense of obedience but, rather, motivated by the cause of justice.[25] Indeed, the Zohar contrasts this behavior with that of Noah, noting that, when informed of God's intention to destroy his generation, Noah holds his peace and says nothing. Within this context, we can understand the idea that Noah would have been greater if exposed to righteous role models. Knowledge of the conduct of Abraham would have provided Noah with a model of how basic moral values – the values represented by God – are applied in the world, independently of adherence to God's specific instructions. This provides an instructive template for Jews today in that narrative can clarify the ways in which those values can be applied in areas which are not subject to specific halakhic definition.[26]

A third dimension of the normativity of Torah narrative is, as mentioned above, its presentation of history as an ongoing process of change. The consequence of this perspective is that the historical narrative has meaning and ethical significance as one reflects and understands one's life in the context of a meaningful history. Yerushalmi contrasts this with the approach of Greek historians who were concerned with recording

[25] Cf. Netsiv, *Ha'amek Davar*, Introduction to Genesis.

[26] For reference to another Biblical illustration of the effectiveness of narrative in drawing attention to aspects of one's ethical conduct, see Soren Kierkegaard, *For Self-Examination* (Princeton, 1974), 61-64. I am grateful to Rabbi Shalom Carmy for this reference.

historical facts but not with constructing a meaningful narrative. The Greek writer Herodotus, widely known as "the father of history" was interested in history because it contained exemplary cases of courage and folly, success and failure but he did not see in it any overarching pattern.[27] Yerushalmi concludes that "[i]f Herodotus was the father of history, the father of meaning in history was the Jews."[28]

This characteristic of Torah narrative assumes particular significance in the light of the aforementioned position of Maggid Mishna that the application of Judaic norms can depend, not only on the individual, but on the historical context.[29] While the Maggid Mishna notes the limitations of halakha in stipulating normative behavior in those contexts, the understanding of narrative as an unfolding story in which the current Jewish generation is the most recent chapter provides a framework for understanding Jewish identity and its attendant ethical responsibilities.

An important indication of the ethical implications of this understanding of history is found in Moshe's address to Bnei Yisrael in Parashat Nitsavim: "Not with you alone do I seal this covenant and this imprecation, but with whoever is here, standing with us today before Hashem, our God, and with whoever is not here with us today" (Deuteronomy 29:13).[30]

The reference to "whoever is not here with us today" is understood by, inter alia, Ibn Ezra, Bekhor Shor, and Ohr ha-Hayim as a reference to the future descendants of Moshe's generation. Through the understanding of the interconnectedness of past, present, and future, the Israelites are to understand themselves as featuring in a chapter of a story which unfolds over time and that later generations have a responsibility to continue and be faithful to the narrative. To paraphrase a teaching later expressed by Rabbi Tarfon, it would not be incumbent upon any one individual or generation to complete the task, but neither would they be free to stand aside from it (*Avot* 2:21).

We have, heretofore, clarified some of the limitations of halakha in defining Judaic norms and have explained how some of the features of narrative render it a potent complement to halakha in the elucidation and imparting of Torah ethics. We will now clarify and exemplify our thesis

[27] See Jonathan Sacks, *The Chief Rabbi's Haggadah* (London: Harper Collins, 2003), 77.

[28] Yerushalmi , *Zakhor*, 8.

[29] See also Netsiv cited in footnote 10.

[30] Other verses that emphasize the notion of transmission to the next generation include Genesis 48:16 (see Ramban and Sforno, ad loc.), Exodus 13:8, and Deuteronomy 4:9 and 4:29.

with regard to three important spheres of Jewish ethical life: basic moral sensitivity, understanding Jewish identity and its ethical implications, and identification of a personal calling.

## MORAL SENSITIVITY

The Biblical narrative assumes the understanding later explicitly articulated in rabbinic literature that human beings bear an innate intuitive sensitivity to moral values, a capacity which some Torah thinkers associate with humanity's Divine image.[31] However, as we know all too well from personal experience and knowledge of history and current events, this sensitivity is subject to dilution and distortion. Hence, one of the roles of Torah moral education is to reinforce the intuitive appreciation of moral values.

As explained above, one of the ways in which narrative can be effective in moral education is its resonance and its tendency to elicit empathy on the part of the reader. This underscores the potential impact of narrative in developing the reader's intuitive moral sensitivities.

Indeed, it is this very approach to Biblical narrative that has been articulated by rabbinic thinkers. Hence, Rabbi Tsadok ha-Kohen of Lublin[32] observes that the narratives of the Patriarchs present stories of their exceptional character traits and accounts of their settling and civilizing the world. R. Tsadok contrasts the conduct of the Patriarchs with the behavior in cultures such as the generation of the flood and the inhabitants of Sodom.

In truth, the depiction of characters in the Scripture is not without moral ambiguity. A peshat-oriented analysis of Torah narrative does not support a simple classification of Biblical characters as perfectly good or absolutely evil. In contrast, as noted by Rabbi Zvi Hirsch Chajes, midrash typically presents Biblical characters as clearly demarcated heroes and villains.[33]

The study of Biblical and midrashic narrative, in this approach, plays an important role in the development and augmenting of one's appreciation

[31] See Anthony Knopf, "Moral Intuition and Education," *En Route: The Journal of the Aspen Center for Social Values* (January 2016), 7-12, accessed 20 April 2016 at https://www.theaspencenter.org/print-library.

[32] *Or Zaru'a la-Tsaddik*, p. 7. See similarly, Rabbi Aharon Kotler, *Mishnat Rabbi Aharon,* (Lakewood, NJ: Center for the Teachings of Rabbi Aharon), 1:201.

[33] *Mavo Ha-Aggadot*, printed at beginning of standard editions of *Ein Yaakov*.

for core ethical values and plays a decisive role in moral decision making in areas that are not defined by halakha.

The aforementioned effectiveness of stories in demonstrating how values can be applied in the course of everyday life is also relevant to an appreciation of the moral value of Torah narrative. One of innumerable examples is that of the hospitality shown by Abraham to the three angels. As Rashbam notes in his commentary to Genesis 26:5, the offering of hospitality is consonant with human reason. The perceptive reader of the story, however, will learn from the haste and eagerness with which Abraham performs this kindness which is emphasized repeatedly in the text (Genesis 18:2, 6, and 7).

Such examples illustrate how Torah narrative can stimulate and strengthen moral sensitivity as well as demonstrate ways in which ethical values can be applied. Such moral sensitivity and understanding is necessary in order to make ethical judgments in instances in which there is no clear halakhic directive.

## JEWISH IDENTITY AND ETHICS

We have shown that Torah narrative often demonstrates and exemplifies the ways in which moral principles can be applied in the course of life. It is equally true that there are ideas specific to Jewish spirituality and ethics which are to be elicited from Scriptural and Rabbinic stories. A noteworthy example of this is presented by the Rambam in his discussion of the laws relating to the treatment of Canaanite slaves. At the end of *Hilkhot Avadim*, having delineated the formal requirements, the Rambam writes: "Although this is the law, [it reflects] the attribute of piety and the ways of wisdom for a person to be merciful and pursue justice…The early Sages would give a slave [a portion] from every dish that they themselves would eat and would serve the food of their animals and slaves before their own."[34]

The conduct of the Sages is invoked to demonstrate the ways in which Jewish values are to be applied beyond that which is formally required by Jewish law.

Another example from rabbinic literature is the story of Rav Safra who, while reciting Shema, receives an offer from a gentile seeking to buy

[34] Rambam, *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilkhot Avadim* 9:8. Translation from Judah Goldberg, "Before Sinai: Jewish Values and Jewish Law," http://etzion.org.il/vbm/english/archive/sinai/07sinai.htm.

a diamond from him. Though R. Safra is satisfied with the offer, he does not interrupt his Shema. The buyer, misinterpreting R. Safra's lack of response, increases the offer. On completing the Shema, R. Safra insists on selling the stone at the price originally offered because he had decided to do so when the offer was made (*She'iltot* 36). As R. Soloveitchik explains, selling the diamond at the higher price would not have been a violation of justice as there had been no deal between the vendor and purchaser. From the standpoint of ethics, however, one must be truthful not only to others but also to oneself.[35]

Torah narrative not only functions as a source and inspiration for Jewish ethical perspective but, on a more fundamental level, presents a context for understanding Jewish identity.

In his book, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, psychologist Daniel Kahneman asks his readers to imagine facing an operation in which they will scream in pain and beg the surgeon to stop after which they would be given an amnesia-inducing drug that will completely wipe out any memory of the episode. Kahneman records that his informal observation indicates "that most people are remarkably indifferent to the pains of their experiencing self" and, hence, would not shirk from the operation if they knew that they would subsequently have no memory of it. This thought experiment, along with many other anecdotes and arguments in his book, supports the notion that our memories are fundamental to our sense of self. He concludes the chapter with an affirmation of this perspective: "Odd as it may seem, I am my remembering self, and the experiencing self, who does my living, is like a stranger to me."[36]

These observations provide the foundations for our understanding of Jewish identity in terms of memory. While an individual's personal memories are always significant, Judaism adds a new dimension to this concept through presenting an expanded conception of identity. A Jew is to relate to the Jewish past as his or her personal memory.

The most well-known actualization of this approach is the Pesach Seder and its attendant obligation to "view oneself as though he had left Egypt" (*Mishna Pesahim* 10:5) or even, in the Rambam's formulation, to "demonstrate for himself as if he himself is leaving Egyptian servitude

[35] Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Abraham's Journey: Reflections on the Life of the Founding Patriarch*, edited by David Shatz, Joel B. Wolowelsky, and Reuven Ziegler (Jersey City, NJ: Ktav, 2008), 107.

[36] *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011), 390. For more on the importance of memories and stories for the meaningful life, see, p. 389.

right now."[37] The Jew is called upon to relate to this stage of Jewish history as personal memory.

In ancient times, the reinforcing and transmission of this consciousness was not confined to Seder night but also featured centrally in the bringing of the first fruits in which each individual made a declaration, including the repeated usage of the first person, underscoring a personal identification with the narrative[38]: *"My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down into Egypt with a few people and lived there and became a great nation…And God brought us out of Egypt with a strong hand and an outstretched arm…"* (Deuteronomy 26:5-10).

While these sources present the idea of cross-generational Jewish identity as relating specifically to the exodus story, Rabbenu Bechayei Ben Asher sees a more general application in Moshe's aforementioned address in Parashat Nitsavim. In explaining the idea that the covenant is binding on later generations, Rabbenu Bechayei compares the Jewish People to a tree in an analogy in which Moshe's audience correlates to the roots and the later generations to the branches which would sprout from the roots.[39] Hence, the Jewish people throughout history bear an essential unity, expressed in the metaphor of a single developing organism.[40]

This expanded conception of identity provides a transformative layer to Khaneman's understanding of the narrative foundations of selfhood. A Jew's self-understanding is not confined to the narrative of his or her physical existence but is recognized as the most recent chapter of a 4,000-year story.

An important consequence of the centrality of narrative for self-understanding is its significance for ethical decision making. Philosophers have rarely recognized this importance, but it has been given prominent exposure by the moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre in his classic work, *After Virtue*, where he states "I can only answer the question 'What am I to do?' if I can answer the prior question 'Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?'"[41]

Though an exhaustive study of the ethical implications of the narrative foundations of Jewish identity is beyond the purview of this article, it is worth exemplifying MacIntyre's thesis with reference to Torah

[37] Rambam, *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilkhot Hamets u-Matsa* 7:6.

[38] See Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, "Ki Tavo (5773) – A Sense of History," accessed April 20, 2016, http://www.rabbisacks.org/ki-tavo-a-sense-of-history/.

[39] Commentary to Deuteronomy 29:13.

[40] See also Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man*, 118 and 120.

[41] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*: *A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 201.

narrative. A narrative-based understanding of Jewish identity impacts the conceptual and ethical approach to halakhic observance in general, specifically with respect to the trait of compassion.

MacIntyre has argued that human action is only meaningful in a narrative context. To illustrate his thesis, he refers to the idea of a recipe and observes that the instructions to break eggs, add flour, or mix in a bowl are only intelligible if put in a sequence that tells the "story" of how to bake a cake. Moreover, MacIntyre explains, the recipe example can be used to show that actions prescribed in a cook book require a context to make any sense. He presents an amusing example of breaking eggs into a bowl in the middle of lecturing on the philosophy of Immanuel Kant to explain that such behavior, lacking a meaningful context, cannot be considered intelligible action.[42]

MacIntyre's explanation of the necessity of narrative and context for the intelligibility of human behavior is instructive for our approach to the observance of Jewish law. While many observant Jews, dating back at least to the time of the prophets, have adopted a habitual attitude to halakhic practice, MacIntyre's compelling perspective underscores the importance of narrative context for meaningful mitsva observance.[43]

Such an attitude toward Jewish law is articulated eloquently, if somewhat vaguely, by R. Soloveitchik who describes how "[w]e tell the story of laws which form the foundations of Jewish morality [and]… the story of honesty and sincerity, love and sympathy."[44]

Let us elucidate the nature of this story which, we argue, provides a pre-eminently meaningful context for halakhic practice. Perhaps the most well-known usage of narrative to provide a meaningful understanding of the basis and purpose of interpersonal mitsvot is presented in the gemara in Sota in which R. Hama ben R. Ḥanina explains the precept of walking in the ways of God in terms of the emulation of His kindness in clothing the naked, visiting the sick, comforting the mourners, and burying the dead (*Sotah* 14a).[45]

This approach to the imperative to help those in need undoubtedly adds great meaning by viewing it in the light of the aspiration to emulate God. Moreover, the concept of emulation of God (*imitatio Dei*) in Jewish thought is not limited to acts of kindness but includes other characteristics such as humility[46] and mitsvot such as standing up before the

[42] MacIntyre, 209-210.
[43] Mishna *Pesahim*, 10:5.
[44] "The Community," *Tradition* 17:2 (1978), 23.
[45] See also Rashi's commentary to Deuteronomy 13:5.
[46] See Genesis 18:17, *Amos* 3:7, *Sanhedrin* 38b, and *Megillah* 31a.

elderly,[47] the observance of and granting of rest to servants on Shabbat,[48] prayer (*Berakhot* 7a), putting on Tefillin (*Berakhot* 6a), studying Torah, and teaching little children (*Avoda Zara* 3b). Indeed, the purpose of mitsva observance in general is to attain holiness which is the supreme goal of *imitatio Dei*.[49]

This idea can be better understood through reference to a famous article by law professor Robert Cover on the relationship between narrative and law.[50] Cover argues that the laws of each society are based on a vision of an ideal that is contrary to the current reality. Cover explains that law is not merely a vision but is grounded in an understanding of the current state of affairs. The tension between the reality and the vision mandates a particular set of laws – that is, efforts at transformation to bridge the gap between the reality and the ideal. This relationship between the current reality and the moral vision requires a consciousness of the way things are, the way things ought to be, and the way things might be. Cover argues that these domains are integrated in narrative. The underlying narrative relates how the society came to have that vision of the ideal order, what historical experience led to the enactments of the law, and what they were intended to achieve. The law is understood in the context of the continuity of a realistic vision of progressive realization of the ideal. If we were to apply Cover's understanding of law to our discussion of *imitatio Dei*, we would identify the social ideal as one in which Jews emulate the Divine characteristics as the means for Jewish society to attain that collective Godliness.

Samuel J. Levine has noted the correspondence between the work of Robert Cover and that of the literary figure, Hayim Nahman Bialik.[51] In terms evocative of those of Cover discussed above, Bialik writes that aggada is concerned with "what ought to be and what might be…the

[47] See Leviticus 19:32 and *Jerusalem Talmud Rosh Hashanah* 1:3.

[48] See Exodus 20:10-11 and Deuteronomy 5:14-5.

[49] See Exodus 22:30, Leviticus 11:44 and 20:26, and Deuteronomy 14:2 and 14:21. I am indebted to David S. Shapiro, *Studies in Jewish Thought*, Volume One (New York: Yeshiva University Press, 1975), 23 for these Talmudic and Biblical references pertaining to *imitatio Dei*.

[50] Robert M. Cover, "The Supreme Court, 1982 Term – Foreword: Nomos and Narrative" (1983). *Faculty Scholarship Series*. Paper 2705. http://digitalcommons.law.yale.edu/fss_papers/2705. It is noteworthy that most of Cover's examples of societal visions and underlying narratives are from the Torah. I am grateful to Professor Samuel J. Levine for his comments and guidance on this section of the article.

[51] Samuel J. Levine, "Halacha and Aggada: Translating Robert Cover's Nomos and Narrative," *Utah Law Review*, 1998, no. 4 (1998).

desires, the pre-occupations, the ideal of the Jewish people."[52] Bialik himself describes eloquently what he understood to be the "ought," the ideal to which halakha is oriented: "[Halakha] has been inspired and guided by a supreme wisdom which sees the end in the beginning. Day by day, hour by hour, minute by minute, it is intent on its task of creating one form and one form only – the true likeness of God's creatures, the image of God in man."[53]

While, for Bialik, the goal is the development of the image of God in man, the preponderance of traditional sources understand the image of God to be, not an achievement, but a characteristic with which man is endowed. Human beings are created in the image of God, regardless of whether they actualize their Godly potential.[54] Hence, it would be more appropriate to view the goal to which halakha aspires as *imitatio Dei* and that this ideal is the ultimate expression and application of a human being's Godly image.

If this is the case, there is a need to identify a narrative which accounts for the emulation of God's characteristics as an ideal underlying much of halakha. The Rambam provides just such a narrative. In the first chapter of *Hilkhot De'ot*, the Rambam delineates the concept of the golden mean and invokes the verse of "you shall walk in His ways" (Deuteronomy 28:9) as the source for an imperative to emulate God's characteristics and to follow the middle path. At the end of the chapter, the Rambam contextualizes the imperative through reference to narrative: "And this is what Abraham our Forefather taught to his children, as it says: 'that I have known him in order that he will command [his children and the members of his household after him and they will keep the way of God].'"[55]

[52] Levine, *Halachah and Aggadah*, 22.

[53] Levine, *Halachah and Aggadah*, 11.

[54] See, for example, Saadia Gaon in his Arabic translation of the Torah; Ramban, Commentary to Genesis 1:26-27; Rashbatz, *Magen Avot* 3:18; Sforno, Commentary to Genesis 1:26-27; several of the interpretations advanced by Abravanel in his commentary to Genesis 1:26-27 and the *Tosafot Yom Tov* commentary to *Avot* 3:17. However, Abravanel does advance an explanation to the effect that the Divine image is an Acquired intellect which is not a feature of every human being but only of those who have attained it. These sources are discussed by Rabbi Gil Student, "In the Image of God," accessed April 20, 2016, http://www.angelfire.com/mt/talmud/image.html (2000).

[55] Rambam, *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot De'ot* 1:7 quoting Genesis 18:19. See also *Hilkhot Mattenot Aniyim* 10:1 where the Rambam writes, based on the same Biblical passage, that one should be more careful about the mitsva of giving tsedaka than any other mitzvah and that through the giving of tsedaka, one is recognizable as one of the righteous descendants of Abraham.

The Rambam understands that Hashem's use of the term *derekh Hashem* in explaining His relationship with Abraham is, as in the case of the mitzvah of *imitatio Dei*, a reference to Divine attributes. The aspiration to emulate the ways of God is, hence, presented by the Rambam as part of the initial purpose of the special relationship between Abraham and God and that Abraham was charged with educating his children and household in this area.[56]

The understanding of halakha as a means to fulfil the purpose for which our ancestors were chosen – to introduce Godliness into the world through the medium of human character and behavior – imbues the observant Jewish lifestyle with both depth and moral and spiritual significance. Additionally, understanding of mitsvot in this way reveals responsibilities which are not specified in halakha. This idea is indicated by Cover who writes of a "multiplicity of implicit and explicit commitments" associated with the demand objectified in the legal text. He explains that it is "[t]he narratives that any particular group associates with the law [that] bespeak the range of the group's commitments."[57] Hence, an understanding of *imitatio Dei* as a goal of halakha leads to an awareness of accountability to a higher moral standard than is required by simple compliance with the specified legal imperative.

Another compelling framework for the understanding of many mitsvot is the Jewish memory of suffering in Egypt. This affliction of the Hebrews is emphasized in the text which relates the harshness of the taskmasters, the bitterness of the slaves' experience, and the decree to murder Hebrew baby boys (Exodus 1:10-22). The Egypt experience is invoked in the Torah as the basis for numerous laws relating to the proper and compassionate treatment of those on the periphery of society.[58]

The memory of Egypt intensifies the ethical obligations toward those who are often disregarded and may be prone to oppression or other forms

[56] For an excellent discussion and further substantiation of the claim that the Abrahamic narrative reflects the centrality of *imitatio Dei* in the service of God, see Samuel J. Levine, "Looking Beyond the Mercy/Justice Dichotomy: Reflections on the Complementary Roles of Mercy and Justice in Jewish Law and Tradition," *Journal of Catholic Legal Studies* 45, no. 2 (2006).

[57] Cover, "The Supreme Court, 1982 Term – Foreword: Nomos and Narrative," 46.

[58] See Exodus 22:20, Exodus 23:9, and Leviticus 19:33-36. The Talmud indicates in *Bava Metzia* 59b that the Torah exhorts us in 36 Scriptural references to treat the stranger kindly. For citations of other Biblical mitsvot relating to compassionate treatment, presented in the context of the exodus experience, see Brachi Elitzur, "The Collective Memory of the Exodus," accessed April 20 2016, http://etzion.org.il/en/collective-memory-exodus. See also Nehama Leibowitz, *Studies in Shemot*, trans. Aryeh Newman. (Jerusalem: World Zionist Organisation, 1986), 7.

of suffering. The Midrash quotes Rav Nehemiah accordingly: "The Egyptian bondage was of great value for us, since it served to implant within us the quality of kindness and mercy."[59]

The foundations of the relevant laws are not grounded in rational argument but in empathy – an empathy that is meaningful for subsequent generations in terms of their identification of their ancestors' historical experience as personal memory. As R. Soloveitchik explains, "Whenever the Torah wants to impress upon us the mitzvah of having compassion and sympathy for the oppressed in society, it reminds us of our similar helplessness and lowly status during our bondage in Egypt. … The Egyptian experience may therefore be regarded as the fountainhead and moral inspiration for the teaching of compassion which is so pervasive in Jewish Law."[60]

This impact on Jewish character is of great significance for our discussion, both as an important virtue and for its application to ethical behavior, even when not required by halakha. Hence, a judgment concerning the application of Judaic norms involves not only the observance of halakha but the development of ethical perspective based on the Jewish narrative.

## INDIVIDUAL IDENTITY

As is the case with moral sensitivity and Jewish identity, the emotive resonance of a narrative with the reader can have an impact on clarifying his personal callings and responsibilities. When a story or character resonates with the reader, he not only learns something about the text but also gains a deeper self-understanding. If each person is, in a unique as well as a general way, a reflection of the Divine, the deeper understanding of the self is a crucial prerequisite to appreciating the responsibilities associated with one's personal nature, character strengths, and spiritual orientation.

The emotive nature of narrative is surely the reason why, when the Rambam seeks to inspire an appreciation for the preciousness of the land of Israel, he relates a story about "the greatest of our Sages" who would kiss the stones of the land (*Hilkhot Melakhim* 5:10, see also 5:11). As Rabbi Judah Goldberg explains, stories such as these facilitate an

[59] *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Shim'on bar Yohai* on Exodus 13:3.

[60] Abraham R. Besdin, *Reflections of the Rav: Lessons in Jewish thought adapted from lectures of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik* (Jersey City, NJ: Ktav, 1979), 1:190-191.

emotional connection with the land that will inspire some readers to live in Israel even under conditions in which there is no halakhic imperative.[61]

The Biblical text is particularly well-suited to eliciting a morally-effective emotive response from the reader. As Erich Auerbach notes, descriptions in Biblical narrative often omit accounts of the thoughts and feelings of the characters.[62] Emmanuel Levinas saw these textual omissions as a summons to the reader to complete the text in dialogue with the written word.[63] The paucity of detail in the text, especially regarding the emotions of the characters, creates the space needed for a greater personal engagement with the narrative and a concomitant deepening of the reader's self-knowledge.

By the same token, an individual can gain greater clarity on his personal development by finding similarities between the struggles, frustrations, and successes experienced by the Biblical characters and those he experiences in his own life.[64] The talented adolescent who experiences rejection and oppression in young adulthood finds guidance in the personal trajectory of Joseph. The individual whose early life was characterized by immorality and crime realizes the magnitude of his potential through learning of the life story of Reish Lakish.

While recognizing the great importance of the ways in which an individual can develop clarity on his personal responsibilities through study of Torah narrative, it is the realization that one is playing a role in writing the next chapter of the Jewish story which is likely to have the most impact.

As mentioned above, the Biblical stories themselves are sometimes important indicators of the ethical significance of narrative. In seeking to

[61] Judah Goldberg, "Before Sinai: Jewish Values and Jewish Law (Shiur #7: Independence of Berit Avot and its Interaction with Berit Sinai – Part 2)," accessed April 20 2016, http://www.vbm-torah.org/archive/sinai/07sinai.htm.

[62] Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask. (Princeton: 1953, repr. 1974), Chapter 1. In a similar vein, Jerome Bruner explains the significance of the reader's interpretation in understanding a narrative in *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), 35. See similarly, Jonathan Gottschall, *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human* (Boston/New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012), 5-6.

[63] Emmanuel Levinas, "Revelation in the Jewish Tradition," in *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Sean Hand (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), 190-210.

[64] The importance of exposure to narrative for the development of self-knowledge has been discussed by Martha Nussbaum, *Letters to the Next Generation from People Who Know a Thing or Two*, ed. James L. Harmon (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002), 177. See also Susan Sontag, *At the Same Time* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2007), 213.

understand Moses' biography, the reader is mystified by the trajectory of a character who intervenes in order to protect a fellow Hebrew and then to promote peace, only to reject God's request that he return to bring the Hebrews to freedom. The change of orientation is best explained[65] in terms of Moses' dissociation from the story of the Hebrews during his time in Midian. Moses' earlier acts of moral passion were inspired by a consciousness that he was writing a new chapter in the story of the people. During his stay in Midian, he no longer senses this affiliation and has no longing to return and help the people. When God seeks to re-establish Moses' affiliation with the people, He presents Himself as "the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob" with the intention of eliciting Moses' realization of his personal moral destiny in the context of his ancestral narrative.

The example of Moses serves as a compelling template for the significance of an individual understanding his life as part of a greater narrative. Deprive children of stories, says MacIntyre, and you leave them "anxious stutterers in their actions as in their words."[66] The sociologist Edward Shills arrives at a similar conclusion: "[Human beings] need to live within the framework of a world which they possess a chart…The loss of contact with the accomplishments of ancestors is injurious because it deprives subsequent generations of the guiding chart which all human beings… need."[67]

None of these authors come to deny the values of diversity and individuality. Rather, understanding one's life in the context of a multi-generational story provides the individual with a guide to discovering personal meaning and realizing particular responsibilities.

## CONCLUSION

We have argued that narrative occupies a central role in the sphere of Jewish values. Unfortunately, the importance of narrative in these contexts is not sufficiently reflected in communal scholarship and education. This problem was already noted by Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch who lamented the common failure to "search for the principles of Judaism in

[65] See Mosheh Lichtenstein, *Moses: Envoy of God, Envoy of His People* (Jersey City, NJ: Ktav, 2008).

[66] MacIntyre, 216.

[67] Edward Shills, *Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 326.

the pages of Scripture"[68] and R. Soloveitchik bemoaned the widespread failure to identify the Bible as a source of values.[69]

It is hoped that this argument for the centrality of narrative in Jewish ethics will inspire further scholarly analysis of Jewish values in the context of narrative and an exploration of ways in which its significance can be exploited in an educational framework. The ramifications for Jewish identity and moral education could be monumental. To quote R. Soloveitchik one more time:

> [I]t is an exciting story that we tell them. It is the story of a teaching community which cuts across the ages, encompassing people who lived millennia ago, who made their contribution to Knesset Israel, and have left the stage. We also tell them the story of people who, at some point in the distant future, will enter the historical stage. Our story unites countless generations: present, past, and future merge into one great experience.[70]

[68] S.R. Hirsch, *The Nineteen Letters on Judaism*, ed. J. Breuer (New York: 1960), 99-100, 121.

[69] Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Family Redeemed: Essays on Family Relationships*, ed. David Shatz and Joel B. Wolowelsky (New York: Toras HoRav Foundation-Ktav, 2000), 3-4.

[70] Joseph B. Soloveitchik, "The Community," 24.