

# FROM THE PAGES OF TRADITION

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## SAMUEL DAVID LUZZATO ETHICS AND FEELINGS

### INTRODUCTION

This year marks the one hundredth anniversary of the passing of Samuel David Luzzato (1800-1865). Permeated with a deep love for Torah Judaism, Luzzato attempted to meet up with the theological challenges of his day. He was at home in both cultures and in his *ta'amei ha-mitzvot* made a unique contribution to an ethical interpretation of Judaism grounded in a broad theological scheme. The ethical formulations of Luzzato are especially compellingly contemporaneous in view of their psychological insights.

We know that there are many ways of refuting wrong notions. In his prolegomena to *Emunot ve'Deot*, Saadia posits the soul as the verifier of truth "causing errors to vanish, doubts to be removed, proofs to be clarified and arguments to be well-grounded." Clearly sound reasoning and empirical experimentation are reliable means to disprove erroneous ideas.

But what can one do about irrational instincts that tend to corrode body and mind? How can one resist evil passions, repugnant desires that impair our personal and social well-being? To repress and inhibit them is simply to force them into our unconsciousness whence they will re-appear to set up their infectious disorders. Psychiatry has made us aware of the processes by which the unconscious hands over to the mind its mental disorders resulting from repressive drives and transmits them in turn to the body. The unconscious is not a dead end but a laboratory where certain derisive mental mechanisms such as repression, fantasy, projection, rationalization and compensation are worked over and eventually re-appear as detrimental consequences to plague us.

Over a hundred years ago there lived a Jewish scholar in Italy, Samuel David Luzzato, who set out to grapple with deep-seated psychological problem. He was keenly aware of the seductive power of human passions to rise repeatedly in the human frame — although the terms unconscious and repression were unfamiliar to him — and resolved to meet the challenge on its own ground. Reason alone or a sense of social welfare, he argued, were not strong enough deterrents of man's overpowering instincts which persist within us and exert such influence upon our moral be-

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havior.<sup>1</sup> No maxim, even the Kantian "act as if the principle on which your action is based were to become by your will a universal law of nature," can succeed in the face of an irrational drive for egotistical advantage. It is therefore important to delve directly into the emotional springs of human action and behavior when confronted with the overmastering passions governing man. We must turn to the human emotions themselves as a base for a sound ethical system and utilize the power of some of our benign instincts to counteract our irrational passions for evil and immorality. The ethical basis of Torah Judaism, Luzzato argued, constitutes a total approach to existence taking into account the emotional responses to human situations.

In his *Yesodei ha-Torah*, Luzzato set out to interpret the *Mitzvot ha-Torah* in the light of the principle of employing certain human instincts to counterpoise human passions. The Torah which always takes into account the nature of man has given us precepts designed to offset derisive instincts by the cultivation of desirable impulses such as compassion, self-assertiveness and fear of retribution. Once we accept emotional drives not as exceptional conditions or as illnesses but as concomitant of human nature, we have begun the race to guard against their ravages which always take us unawares as something from "outside."

The following is a translation of *Yesodei ha-Torah*, Chapters 5, 18 and 19.

### SELECTIONS FROM LUZZATO'S INTRODUCTION TO YESODEI HA-TORAH

The first basis for the perfection of virtue is compassion. Compassion is an emotional quality and is the foundation of love, kindness and justice. It is the only motivation which prompts us to do good without the prospect of natural or supernatural compensation in this world or the hereafter. For compassion is its own reward. A compassionate person usually identifies himself with a suffering human being and does not relax until he helps to alleviate the latter's suffering.

Obviously if we wish to train a child to follow a righteous course calculated to improve his behavior patterns we must try to reinforce his emotional quality of compassion by word and deed. A child that is exposed to constant cruelty and selfishness will eventually become hard and insensitive and lose every vestige of mercy. On the other hand a child that is conditioned to witness

deeds of compassion and kindness and hears them being extolled while selfishness and cruelty are repudiated, will have his sense of mercy and compassion fortified and will grow up to be compassionate, merciful, just and dependable.

The Torah, which Moses gave to the people of Israel, leads us in the way of compassion and kindness. We are commanded to leave gleanings, forgotten sheaf and the corners of the field for the poor, the stranger, the orphan and the widow. We are forbidden to take usury from the poor or to enter his home to take his pledge in the form of the mill or the upper millstone or the garment of a widow. The Torah ordains: "If thou at all take thy neighbor's garment to pledge, thou shalt restore it unto him by the time the sun goeth down." Mark well what the Torah says after that command: "For that is his only covering, it is his garment for his skin, wherein shall he sleep?"<sup>2</sup>

Here is a simple legal situation where a creditor who loaned his money which was long overdue proceeded to take a pledge. He took the debtor's garment to which he was rightfully entitled unless he gives him something else. He knows, however, that by returning the garment every evening to the debtor, he may forfeit the loan. The creditor argues correctly by asserting "If he had wanted the same as a gift, I might have given it to him. But now that he promised to repay and doesn't, he is a thief inclined to steal and harm his fellowmen. Why should I then return a robber's garment in pledge? Why should I be concerned whether he will have a garment to sleep in?" Surely some philosophers and especially the exponents of the "honor" theory will agree with the creditor's argument. The Torah, however, teaches compassion and kindness and puts it succinctly — "Wherein shall he sleep?"

Likewise when the Torah commanded the cancellation of debts on the seventh year we would presume that anyone with common sense will refrain from extending a loan at the end of the sixth year, knowing that it will not be repaid. No moralist or exponent of the "honor" theory will blame anyone for refusing to offer a loan at such a time. But the Torah says: "The seventh year, the year of release is at hand and thine eye be evil against thy needy brother and thou give him naught. . . Thou shalt surely give him and thy heart shall not be grieved when thou givest into him."<sup>3</sup>

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### NOTES

1. In *Yesodei ha-Torah*, Ch. 7 and 8 he says: "The thinkers who base behavior patterns on reason and knowledge are actually going against nature or God's Will and for this reason most people do not follow them. Others maintain that the social welfare of society demands that its constituent members pursue the way of righteousness. Inasmuch as the security of the individual depends upon the group, it behooves every person to practice justice and promote the well-being of the groups. This is doubtless true. But will this motif really advance the moral fibre of each person? The argument against it may be thus: 'Philosophers are exhorting us that unless each member of society will improve his actions, the entire social order will disintegrate and chaos will ensue. This is correct. Would that all members of society act like brothers pursuing righteousness and loving truth and peace.' Alas, when I note that the majority of the people in our community are avaricious, then I say, 'pity on me,' for I will die in my righteousness since only I will have practised it.

"But still worse is the attitude of the wicked persons who outwardly uphold the theory of some philosophers and agree that society can survive only on righteousness and justice. In their hearts, however, they devise all sorts of schemes of exemption from the righteous path whenever it will serve their purposes. All the efforts by the moralists to persuade them that it is wrong for an individual to benefit at the expense of the group will not succeed inasmuch as man is motivated by what he sees at present. Should he be convinced that a given disadvantage to society may be a boon to his success and further his personal interests, he will pay no attention to the counsel of the moralists and will not surrender that which benefits him. He will even justify his action by asking his teachers if their concern for the social welfare was not for the sake of his own benefit."

2. Exodus 22:25-26.

3. Deuteronomy 15:9.