

Shlomo Riskin is Rabbi of Lincoln Square Synagogue  
and Dean of Mesivta Ohr Torah.

## INCULCATING ETHICAL IDEALS WITHIN OUR STUDENTS

When Mesivta Ohr Torah – Manhattan Hebrew High Schools – were about to open nine years ago, I interviewed approximately one dozen rabbinic candidates from major yeshivot throughout the country. One of the questions I asked was: “If you prepay for an electric shaver at a gentile-owned department store and receive two shavers in the mail, what should you do with the second shaver?” Much to my shock and chagrin, all but one of these *musmakhim* maintained that the second shaver was to be kept as well and a number even insisted that it was forbidden to return the shaver, as one dare not “strengthen the hands of the gentile.” Needless to say, the one candidate who insisted that the shaver be returned with a note explaining that, as an Orthodox Jew, it is forbidden to keep property which one did not pay for – thus injecting the injunction to sanctify God’s Name in the eyes of the gentile world – received the position.

This incident, which I have since repeated a number of times at various rabbinic and educators conventions, highlights one of the most significant halakhot facing contemporary Jewish education. If, indeed, the goal of Torah-true Judaism is to produce not only a glatt kosher Jew but also a glatt yoshev Jew, if Jewish law speaks not only to the ritual but also to the ethical, then we may very well be often missing the mark. I would suggest the following guidelines for attempting to inculcate ethical ideals within our students.

The attitude with which Torah is presented is often as critical as the substance of the Torah itself. Although it is widely asserted that R. Chaim Brisker maintains that by studying the entire Torah one will automatically emerge an ethical personality (and on these grounds he vigorously opposed the mussar movement), I do not believe that this position is valid today. Firstly, the vast majority of our students will not learn all of Torah. Secondly, Reb Chaim lived in a total environment which embraced Torah values. This is hardly

the situation in America today. Moreover, it was precisely this issue of which Nachmanides was speaking in his renowned interpretation of the biblical injunction “You shall be holy” (Leviticus 19:2). He understood that it was possible for a most ritually observant Jew to nevertheless remain a “dastard within the eyes of the law” by discovering the various loopholes within the system which would enable him to perpetuate his evil actions. Hence the Torah established an overall principle of holiness which must guide all of our decisions and suffuse all of our deeds. Nachmanides similarly expresses the biblical command “and you shall do the right and the good” (Deuteronomy 6:18). After all, Jewish law cannot necessarily cover every possible event within one’s lifetime; the overall attitude within which one approaches Jewish law must be in order to do the right and the good. The fundamental source for Nachmanides’ position is the talmudic story which records the incident of the porters of Rabba, the son of Rav Huna. They had apparently been negligent while transporting a barrel of wine, breaking the barrel and losing the wine. Rabba held them accountable and took their garments in payment. When they complained about this judgment to Rav, he insisted that the garments be returned. “Is this the law?” asked Rabba. “Yes,” answered Rav, citing the verse “in order that you may walk in the path of the good.” When the porters further complained that they had received no payment for their work and that they were hungry, Rav commanded Rabba to pay them their wages. Once again, Rabba queried, “Is this the law?” Rav replies, “Yes,” citing the verse “and maintain the path of the righteous.” Thus it is clear that there are certain situations in which what would ordinarily be considered “beyond the requirement of the law” assumes the status of the law. This depends upon the nature of the individual’s involvement. Most important of all, this depends upon the attitude of those studying and interpreting the law.<sup>1</sup>

There is a constant interpenetration between the ritual and the ethical within Jewish law. It seems apparent from the Bible – Professor Yeshayahu Leibowitz notwithstanding – that the Almighty Himself is bound by ethical behavior. Otherwise Abraham could never have expressed the argument: “Will the Judge of the entire earth not act justly?” (Genesis 18:25). Indeed, the great codifier of Jewish law, Maimonides, has taken the fundamental descriptive attributes of the Almighty, as it were, and placed them as the cornerstone of human ethical action. When God responds to Moses’ question “explain to me Your ways,” with his thirteen Divine attributes of compassion, loving kindness, and truth, Maimonides insists that each one of these characteristics must be adopted by the human being who was, after

all, created in the Divine Image and must walk in the Divine path.<sup>2</sup> It is therefore obvious that the ultimate goal of perfecting the ritual and achieving a closeness to the Almighty must be the development of the Divine characteristics of compassion, loving kindness, and truth.

When viewed from this perspective, the ritual always encompasses an ethical moment. Hence, the Sabbath is at one and the same time a symbol of the Divine creation of the universe as well as of the exodus from Egypt. The Decalogue in the book of Exodus stresses the first, the Decalogue in the book of Deuteronomy the second. The two are really two aspects of the same truth. If the Almighty is Creator then all human beings are creatures. If all of humanity shares a common creaturehood, it obviously follows that no one individual has the right to enslave another. If one deeply understands the message of the Sabbath, he or she is sensitized to the fact that that which unites us with every living creature is far greater than anything which might divide us. The Sabbath is, therefore, a model for, and worthy of, peace and harmony and love.

There is no aspect of Jewish ritual which is not touched by the ethical. "Thou shalt not seethe a kid in its mother's milk" is the biblical source for the separation of meat and milk. Our process of kosherizing attempts to remove as much of the blood of the animal as possible because the Bible maintains "that blood is the soul of life." Apparently, in addition to anything else it may be expressing, the rules of *kashrut* serve to inculcate human discipline and emphasize the ethical ambiguities associated with eating meat; and if ethical issues impact upon the simplest ritual areas of the Sabbath and *kashrut*, how much more do they inspire laws of marriage, labor relations and social obligations. In studying the tractate *Kiddushin*, the Jewish notion of secular ethics and personal sensitivity between husband and wife must be highlighted. In studying the talmudic sources dealing with damages, ethical and moral sensitivity must be seen as the very foundation of Jewish life.

We can see that all of the Jewish texts are suffused with ethics. At the same time, however, it would certainly be helpful to spend some time each day on specific treatises dealing with ethical issues such as *Mesilat Yesharim* and *Shemirat Halashon*. But Jewish ethics dare not be allowed to remain in the academic area alone. The rebbe must relate the discussion to the students at hand and discuss with the younger ones the ethical issues involved in "helping" weaker students during an examination, and with the older ones proper sensitivity in boy-girl relationships during the dating period. Small groups which work on specific issues such as anger and selfishness must be set up, led by religious personalities who are grounded in psychological ex-

pertise. A day devoted to no words but words of Talmud can serve to magnificently highlight the pitfalls of speech and the problems associated with slander and gossip. Every student must be involved in some kind of *hesed* project in which he visits a shut-in or tutors a talmud Torah student or “adopts” a resident of an old-age home. The importance of his work in *hesed* is no less than that of his work in mathematics, and so it must be instituted by administration and parents alike.

All of this is possible only when students are exposed to the kind of teachers who embody the highest ideals of ethical conduct. It has correctly been stated that proper action is not taught as much as it is caught. Students must view their instructors as rebbe-parents, as guide-mentors. They must learn from them as well as from their parents the reasons of ethical sensitivity. This is done not so much by the teaching of the text as by the experience of a person. How does the rebbe treat the weaker students of the class? How does the rebbe relate to his spouse, to a beggar on the street, to a car accident on the highway? Relationship between student and teacher must go far beyond the confines of any physical institution and must enable the one to learn from the other not only in the classroom of school but also in the classroom of life. It is only when Torah-true Jews express heightened ethical and moral sensitivity that the not-yet-religious Jews and the as yet-not-converted gentiles will be inspired to praise the God of Torah and draw near to His teachings.

## NOTES

1. B.T. *Baba Metsiah* 30b.
2. *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhos Deot* 1, 67.