

# BUILDING JEWISH ETHICAL CHARACTER

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## Mitzvos as “Springboards” for Ethical Behavior

Rabbi Jacob S. Weinberg

A large number of books and articles have been published during the last few months discussing the deterioration of morals and ethics that is taking place in our nation. Clearly related to this deterioration is the problem of juvenile delinquency that is assuming crucial proportions. More and more of our trained social scientists are turning their minds and energies to these problems.

It is of deep interest to note how much agreement we find among these experts in attributing this deterioration to the rapid rate of change inherent in modern civilization. It seems that a state of flux is not considered conducive to the development of standards of conduct. Thus, through the back door so to speak, these writers recognize the need of a standard of values as the basis for moral living. Yet, it should have been self-apparent that without a standard by which to judge our behavior there can be no morals or ethics.

But there's the rub. Where are we to find such a standard? We speak out in truisms when we point out what our generation more than any other knows—that humanism cannot provide this standard. We know as a matter of empirical fact that the highest philosophical understanding does not give us “good people.” Have we not seen the most civilized people of the world, the Germans, descend to the level of the most degenerate of beasts? To depend upon a desire to do that which is best for mankind is to depend upon a delusion. It is not possible for a man to put the

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benefit or welfare of others above what appears to be his own advantage unless he has a justifying motivation.

Nor is it possible to appeal to a sense of prudence. Throughout its long and tortuous history, mankind has never been able to guide itself by prudence. The belief that a present sacrifice will result in a greater return at a later date, i.e., that by refraining from stealing from my friend now I will be spared a theft from his later, has never proven a sufficient deterrent.

Only the reverence owed to a higher being can provide the standard which we are seeking. The knowledge that the Almighty has made man in His image, and that our duties to our fellow-men are no more than a segment of our duties to our Creator—this realization can give us the basis for a true morality.

Is this, then, the ultimate solution of the problem? Are we to concentrate our efforts in teaching our youth the truths of *HaShem* and find in their recognition of these truths a new flowering of morality and goodness? The experience of the nations which through the centuries has made the moral life its chief concern denies the efficacy of this solution. Most important of all, the Torah tells us that this approach in itself is not sufficient. "Good hearts" which love humanity and feel that, while they may not abide the "kitchen laws" of the Torah, they do accept the "spiritual message" of the Prophets, will find themselves unable to maintain their standards.

Every one is familiar with the Midrash concerning the giving of the Torah to Israel. Before G-d offered us the Torah, He went to all the other nations on earth and offered it to them. Each nation asked: "What will the Torah demand of us?"—and each was given an answer. Yet all, upon hearing the answer, exclaimed: "It is too difficult."

What were the answers? Was it the laws of *kashrus* that the nations found so difficult, or the laws of *taharas hamishpachah*—family purity—or the laws of *Shabbos* that made it impossible for them to accept? No! The answers given were: "Thou shalt not steal," "Thou shalt not commit adultery," "Thou shalt not commit murder." These were the precepts that made the Torah unacceptable to the nations.

How basic is this teaching of our *Chazal*! With what profundity they have sheared away illusion after illusion and laid bare, for all to see, the fundamental truth of our lives.

It is morality and ethics themselves that are difficult. To subject our physical desires to the control of right and wrong is a

struggle that must occupy us all our lifetimes. This being the case, it becomes clear that a mere theoretical acceptance of standards of good and evil cannot have the power to control evil passions. No wonder that a people of philosophers, social service experts and humanists perpetrated horrors that remain beyond our mind's ability to conceive. Honesty, integrity, morality—all these are lost by a people who would depend only on their spiritual and mental acceptance of the meaning of good and evil.

Standards are the first step. They are essential, but they cannot do the job alone. We must find the help that will enable us to put these standards to use—and that help we find only in the Torah.

Again a *Chazal* known to us all: When Hillel was asked to sum up the import of the Torah he answered, "Do not do unto others that which is hateful to you. The rest is commentary, go and learn it."

A familiar teaching, yet one whose implications are frequently ignored. How can this be a summation of the many laws of the Torah? Has this statement anything to do with *t'fillin*? Are the laws of *Succah* a commentary on Hillel's statement?

Hillel reveals to us here the heart of Torah teaching. If we would refrain from doing to others what we do not want to have done to us we must learn the Torah—to keep its laws. It is the Torah with all its mitzvos that provide the means—the only means—through which we may prevail in our lifetime struggle for the good. Here lies the ultimate solution to our problem—in the constant subjection of ourselves to the commands of the Torah.

This is not the place to discuss the profound implications of this teaching in the understanding of the relationship of mind to body and of man to the Almighty. Suffice it for our purposes to bring to attention the teaching itself. Not a "Jewish heart" but Jewish action can make it possible for us to lead lives of nobility and holiness.

It is, of course, true that the observance of the mitzvos engenders in us a strength of self-discipline and control. In all those areas where basic human needs and drives are to be found, there we find the *dinim* of the Torah. Do you hunger? First wash make the appropriate blessing and then eat—but only after ascertaining that the food may properly be eaten. And so with all human needs and urges.

It is, of course, true that our constant submission to the will of *HaShem Yisborach* generates humility and a sense of proportion



with which we may face the moral trials we meet daily.

It is, of course, true that by keeping His precepts we develop a closeness to the Almighty, through which we can partake of His holiness and become the highest of all created beings.

All these things are true, and all these benefits come about. But there is a truth higher than these truths, and a benefit higher than these benefits. And this truth and this benefit is this: The *Ribono Shel Olom* tells us that these precepts and these rituals will make us moral and ethical—and we are secure in our trust in Him.

This truth is the foundation of the Jewish Day School program. At last, through these schools, we have a powerful means of coping with the many problems which we and our children face. It is a major task of the Day School to give its students the understanding that observing the *Shabbos* is even more than fulfilling our ritual obligations to our Creator, that eating matzos on *Pesach* does even more than give us the merit of a mitzvah. They provide us with the strength of spirit and action to overcome our own inclinations and make possible the self-control to live a moral life. Perhaps the measure of success of our Day School is in the degree to which they give our young this understanding.

This truth also places a challenging burden upon Jewish parents. They must so conduct their lives as to become veritable citadels of morality. For, as we have seen, it is in the day-to-day observance of all the minutiae of our Torah that we will find the training and character development that can produce of our young that “nation of priests, a holy people” that is our destiny.

## The Teaching of *Middos*

Rabbi Joseph Elias

The teaching of *middos* (perhaps best, though inadequately, translated as *good character qualities*) is very often viewed as one of the minor subjects in the *yeshivah k'tanah* curriculum—a subject like several others, important but subordinate, to be pursued by occasional memorization of sayings of our Sages, by the study of relevant passages from the *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch*, or at best a *mussar* talk.

At the same time, there is a great deal of dissatisfaction with the results attained, and I am probably expected to offer some novel suggestions and techniques along the same lines. However, I believe that our lack of success in teaching *middos* is largely due to the basic approach which I described and which, I think, must be radically revised if we are to attain better results. We have to take a fresh look at the place of *middos* in our overall educational framework, and in that way come to a clearer understanding of how *middos* can and should be taught. Details of technique can only be discussed after we have clarified the nature of the subject.

From the *Halachic* authorities, it is obvious that the inculcation of *middos* is a part of *mitzvas chinuch* just as much as the inculcation of any other mitzvos. But when we look a little deeper into the matter, we find that this is not a case of one obligation next to or alongside the other; we discover that there is a much more fundamental relationship: our practice of mitzvos, our holding of sound views, even our acquisition of knowledge actually depends upon our development of *middos*. “*Der Alter*” of

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Slobodka, a famous teacher of *mussar*, pointed out that, according to our Sages, the Torah wrote "We will make man" to teach us a certain lesson, even though this expression could be misinterpreted by the idolators who *wanted to be misled*; the Torah did not consider it necessary to avoid this possibility since nobody would err who did not want to err. A person's understanding of life and of the world is colored by his desires and his convenience, and therefore only the development of proper *middos* will enable him to come to a true understanding. "The Heavens declare the glory of the Lord . . ."—why, then, asked Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler, (another master of *mussar*), does not everybody hear the message? The answer is that they do not want to hear it.

If this is true—and there are many proofs in our sacred writings—then our approach to the teaching of *middos* is altogether inadequate. Then, *middos* cannot be considered as one subject by the side of others but must be seen as the root and foundation of our entire *chinuch*. As long as we look at our program in terms of subjects and believe that our task is merely the conveying of knowledge—and we even see the teaching of *middos* as a matter of giving over knowledge—we will never reach our goal, despite all the preaching we do. Rather, we must realize that it is our task to keep *dinim* (laws) and *hashkofos* (attitudes) from remaining pure and abstract theories, and we must make them part of the nature, character and personality of the child—and the means to that end is the development of *middos*. It follows that the teaching of *middos* and the training in them are fundamental to our entire *chinuch*; that they must encompass the entire child at all times; and that they must be completely interwoven with the conveying of knowledge, the training for practical mitzvah observance, and the inculcation of sound *hashkofos*.

The fact is that all these areas of education actually shade into one another. Where does one draw the line? "Honoring father and mother"—a mitzvah? A doctrine? A *middoh*? Obviously it represents all three. The *K'sav Sofer* explained that Torah must be taught in such a way that even "when you go on the way," even when the child has embarked on his own road through life, the teachings will not be discarded. We must not over-awe the child and impose on him practices or ideas that he will, G-d forbid, discard when he stands on his own feet, but we must root them in his personality—which means the proper development of *middos*. This inter-relation between different aspects of our educational efforts can perhaps be expressed in this manner:

*middos* must be expressed in deeds, for there is no such thing as an abstract virtue, and, on the contrary, "man is molded by his deeds"—and, on the other hand, the proper doing of mitzvot (including the mitzvot of the heart) depends on the perfection of a person's *middos*.

Let us get down to some concrete examples. There is no Yeshiva, no Beth Jacob school that does not conscientiously teach the laws of honoring father and mother; we labor the point, we talk about it—and yet it is one of the constant complaints of parents that we have not taught the children how to behave towards their parents. The reason, I submit, is very simple. We teach this mitzvah in its "surface aspects," overlooking the fact that, in order to be effective, we must concern ourselves with the parent-child relationship, with the entire psychological and emotional condition of the child—to use the language of the educational psychologist. We must concern ourselves with how the child really feels about the older generation, we must somehow reach him on this point, and then our teaching of *kibbud ov* will come to fruition; otherwise, if we ignore the entire mood of our environment and the whole parent-child pattern that exists on the modern American scene, we are just fooling ourselves.

There are many more instances of such self-delusion under which we often labor.

One of the areas with which every principal is painfully concerned is the cleanliness of the school building. How many institutions are there where he can be satisfied, truly satisfied, that keeping the building clean has become second nature to the child? We talk about it, scold, get angry and punish—or else we beg, we plead, we launch "clean-up campaigns"—and, despite all that, we do not solve the problem. Can we say that this is due to the inability of children to keep their surroundings clean? Such a view is disproven by conditions at home. A child may leave his room in somewhat of a mess, but there is not that utter readiness to tolerate plain dirt which is so often manifested in the classroom. There is more involved here: we are, again, merely touching the surface with our exhortations instead of penetrating to the crucial issues that underlie the child's conduct. In other words, we must seek to reach the child at the point which is the *source* of his actions, rather than preaching at the level of action itself.

Let me try to draw some practical conclusions. If it is true that the inculcation of *middos* is not merely another subject, another



intellectual discipline, but that it aims at providing the emotional and spiritual underpinnings for the intellectual pursuits, we can outline a series of approaches to the teaching of *middos* graded according to their effectiveness. I will list them in order, starting with the lesser or more superficial and ending with the major and more fundamental ones. The first points to be listed are of very real value if they are part of a wider and more profound framework of action—while they will be most ineffective if used by themselves.

### 1. "The Direct Approach"

There is no end to the techniques that a teacher can adopt in order to draw the attention of his pupils to the importance of *middos*. There is value in the daily teaching of *middos*, for five or ten minutes after *t'filloh*, or during lunch or before or after it; in occasional "*middos drives*," or a "*middos hashavuoh*" (weekly) or *middos hachodesh* (monthly) project. Signs in the classrooms, particularly if they are not left on the wall till they fall off by themselves but are regularly changed, will do some good and so will displays and exhibits. (I once saw a very successful *chessed* (kindness) exhibit, where a class cooperated in drawing posters of all the various forms of *chessed* open to the children, and then set up a display for the parents.) There is certainly value in learning by heart appropriate sayings by our Sages, and in collecting such sayings in notebooks, whereby they become part of the pupils' living vocabulary and of their thought. (I know of a teacher who had her pupils enter such sayings alphabetically in a kind of "dictionary book," as they came up in, say, the study of *Rashi*.) All these things are good—and the more they involve the student the better—but they all fall under what may be called "the direct approach," and in matters involving will and emotion this is not the best way. Therefore, they will be truly effective to the degree to which they are part of a wider approach. (It has been argued that the entire *mussar* movement was based on this direct approach. However, Rabbi Israel Salanter—the founder of the movement—was very conscious of the importance of the emotional factor in *mussar*—hence the emphasis on the particular forms of *mussar* learning, such as the *trop*, the *shtibel*, and the *shmuess* and the room left for differences in approach, to fit the individuals to be reached.)

### 2. Integration in the Curriculum

A few examples may suffice to illustrate my conviction that there is no subject, no test, no occasion in the calendar, that does not constantly provide the opportunity to develop *middos*.

Rabbi Dessler's letter on *Emunas Chachomim* (printed in the first volume of *Michtov Mei-Eiliyohu*) points out that nine years had passed from Ahasuerus' banquet till the rise of Haman, when Mordecai called the Jews to repentance for participating in the banquet, which they had long dismissed from their mind. They could readily have reproached him, instead, for provoking their troubles by his stubborn refusal to bow to Haman. They did not do so—and this earned their salvation—because of their great *emunas chachomim* (faith in their leaders). In getting this across to a class before Purim, we have a chance to give the pupils a real understanding of faith and of confidence in G-d.

Another example from *Tanach*: the High Priest Eli's reaction to Samuel's prophecy of the doom of his family. Unless the teacher rushes from one verse to the next without any pause, even the youngest child is bound to be touched by the greatness of Eli in accepting the Divine judgment. In general, many incidents in *Tanach* that, if read by themselves, give a very wrong impression, reveal their true and profound lessons if explained by the teacher in the light of our Sages, and become sources of ethical inspiration. (In this category belong the controversy between Abraham and Lot, according to Rabbi Isaac Sher's "*Avrohom Ovinu*"; Jacob's serving for Rachel, as discussed by Rabbi Aaron Kotler at a Torah Umesorah Teachers Day; or Penina's attitude towards Hannah—of which the Talmud itself says that it was "for the sake of Heaven.") In this manner, the pupil learns to identify with the heroes of our past and to ask "When will my deeds reach those of my forefathers" instead of following the pull of the latest idols of TV and comic strips.

Not all occasions for implanting *middos* in the classroom must be planned—often chance offers the best opportunity. I was told that, once upon a time, in Baranowitz, Rabbi Elchonon Wasserman saw one of his students stoop in the *Beis Hamidrosch*, pick up a piece of paper and, after glancing at it, drop it again. When Rabbi Elchanan walked over and picked up the paper, he realized at once what had happened: the young man had thought it to be a torn piece from a Siddur, but had dropped it when he realized that it was only from a Yiddish newspaper. Rabbi Elchonon called his students together and said: "We must certainly be considerate of our sacred writings—but what about consideration for our fellow man? By dropping this paper, are we not causing somebody else to bend down for nothing?" This incident certainly had a stronger impact than any number of signs on the wall. We cannot compare ourselves to Rabbi Elchonon—



but in our way we must be geared to see and grasp the opportunities for helping our pupils reach higher levels of self-perfection. If only we feel the great need for this, rather than considering ourselves mere teachers of subjects, we will undoubtedly find suitable occasions at every turn. Of course, even when *middos* are cultivated in the manner here described, we are still *talking* about *middos*, and that is not enough—unless we go further.

### 3. The Practice of Middos

I do not mean here practice for its own sake ("This week we will practice being nice and helping others . . .") Rather, we have to find, or create occasions for applying *middos*. When the angels came to Abraham, he used Ismael ". . . to train him in mitzvos" (*Rashi*). The pupil's eyes have to be opened to the need for kindness and help that exists around him; thus, the girl who gives up her recess for some weeks to help a younger pupil gains, even as she gives, for "man is molded by his deeds." *Tz'dokoh* collections can likewise be an educational factor—if they are handled right, not as a matter of unthinking habit or school routine, but as a concrete experience; it is most important that the pupils be made aware of the full significance of the objectives served by the money collected, whether anti-missionary activities, or aid to Torah institutions, or help to the needy.

*Hachnossas orchim* (hospitality), too, can be taught very well—by practice. It is not easy, but where children are put up in one another's or the teacher's home for a "Yeshiva Shabbos," even with some inconvenience, in order to spend a memorable *Shabbos* together, a lesson is taught that does not have to be labored or preached about. In connection with the sufferings of Jews in Russia, the Telsher *Rosh Hayeshiva* suggested that every Yeshiva should start the new week, every Sunday morning, with a few chapters of *T'hilim* (Psalms) for the welfare of our brethren in Russia. Again, these few chapters teach better than any words the meaning of love for another, and of feeling with him in his suffering—and, at the same time, they impress upon the pupil that "we have no one to lean upon but our Father in Heaven." Too often we think of *middos* only as far as interpersonal relations are concerned; in reality, they are involved in our relations to G-d and to ourselves. Truthfulness is a good example, and I would like to note the words of the *Rambam* that "children who understand the meaning of oaths, if they swore to something, should be forced to keep their words, in order to train them"—it is the practical application that teaches a character trait.

### 4. The Example of the Teacher

This is a still more indirect way of teaching *middos*, but it brings the teacher even closer to the soul of the pupil. Hence the Prophet's statement that "the lips of the priest shall guard knowledge, and they shall seek Torah from his mouth, for he is a messenger of the L-rd of Hosts." The concept of the priest carries with it the connotation of perfection, as the Torah commentators point out. There is demanded of the teacher perfection—not only in knowledge, but in *middos* and everything else that goes into the make-up of a person. Such a demand most teachers obviously cannot meet—and we would have to close up all our *chinuch* institutions if it were to be insisted upon—but, at least, as a goal and as a challenge it must be before our eyes. After all, there can be no question about the effect that a teacher has upon his pupils, for good or, G-d forbid, bad.

Interest, patience, even love, are qualities that a child readily senses—and so he also senses impatience and mere going through the motions of teaching. Sometimes the conversations you overhear in a hallway are the most devastating evaluations of a teacher and, while not necessarily correct, they tend to touch some very relevant points; by the same token, they can also form a most moving tribute to a teacher, evidence of how he has reached his pupils and how he has given them a noble image with which to identify. I mentioned earlier the pull of the TV idols—but actually they are mere substitute heroes to fill a need which the children have; we must try to replace them with our great men—but in the most immediate way the teacher can preempt their place and fill it vastly better than they, for he is here, close to the pupil, capable of providing personal attention and affection that they cannot compete with despite autographed pictures and fan clubs.

It should be noted that I obviously do not think of the teacher as so remote from the pupil, in his search of perfection, that he has no human contact with him; the opposite should be true. But even while seeking this necessary closeness, he must remain the embodiment and representative of Torah values; "he should not act with irreverence before his pupils . . ." (*Yoreh Deiah*), but in a manner befitting his mission. The Talmud observes that just as the Torah was received in awe, fear, and trembling, so we must pass it on to our children. The teacher must not only be aware, but he must also demonstrate, in every way, that what he teaches is unlike any other subject of study in the world, and that there is an immeasurable difference between G-d's Torah and



any other area of knowledge. The respect and reverence that he will thus inculcate in his students will mold their approach to Torah, to Torah scholars, to the very buildings dedicated to Torah study, and to every volume that passes through their hands. That this objective can best be attained by the teacher himself, exhibiting the ideal attitude, is possibly the point of the Talmudic statement that "he who loves Torah scholars will have sons who are Torah scholars; he who esteems Torah scholars will have them as sons-in-law; and he who stands in awe of Torah scholars will himself become one." Perhaps our Sages do not mean to refer here to a reward, but to the very concrete result of an attitude demonstrated by a parent and therefore evoking a fitting response in a son or daughter. In the same way, teachers are able to inspire their pupils.

##### 5. "Personal interest in the Pupil"

In the last resort, of course, even the example and general influence of the teacher is not enough. If the teaching of *middos* implies the molding of the pupil's entire personality, it must ultimately take into account the nature of the pupil, his problems and his needs. The teacher must, therefore, try to understand his pupils, draw them close, and guide them well. It is sometimes a heartbreaking exercise in futility when we draw up lists of *middos* to be taught in the course of the school year. The list is invariably very impressive, the principal checks carefully that every teacher "covered" the prescribed *middos*—and yet the problems of a particular class may be so utterly different, so utterly unrelated to this list. It is these problems of his class that a teacher must work on if he is to succeed at all. He may have cliques in his class, with a few of his students treated as pariahs; before long, these children will be transferring to public school—not because they do not like learning Torah, but because they have not been invited to the birthday parties, have been excluded, etc. . . .

It is the teacher's task to sense these tensions and to intervene on the level on which concrete problems of *middos* can alone be dealt with—in personal talks, outside the classroom. The student who is overly aggressive, or attention-seeking, or excessively withdrawn actually—by his behavior—signals for help; here again only personal contact will do. The fact is that every child—whatever his nature, abilities, and weaknesses—is called upon to serve his Creator: "Honor G-d with what you possess," with whatever potential you have been endowed with. This is a difficult task; the child needs help if he is to find the wellsprings of

his own being and the teacher must be prepared to give this help. According to Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch's paraphrase of the Biblical verse, it is his task to "train the boy in *his way*," along the lines of his individual nature; "then he will not leave it even when he grows old." To the extent to which the teacher discharges this task, he shapes his pupil's character, his personality, his *middos*. Of course, the fact that every human being has the ability and duty to serve G-d in some fashion is so obvious that I would not have mentioned it here were it not for this corollary that ultimately the *middos* of a person can only be developed as part of his progress toward his true mission in life.

Let us beware that in our emphasis on covering ground in our classes, on fulfilling ambitious curricular goals, on setting high theoretical requirements, we do not neglect our educational goal: developing the pupil as a Torah personality. If we keep this objective clearly in mind in connection with all facets of our educational effort, and make it the foundation and framework of all our teaching; if we constantly strive to help each pupil to attain this end, and inspire him to bend all his efforts toward it, then, I think the teaching of *middos* will take care of itself.