

How To Be Good

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

When I was a kid, I used to wonder why it was that some children in my circles seemed naturally better and sweeter than others, who seemed naturally evil and nasty. Why did some seem to be so much more religious and obedient than others? I found discipline hard to endure, rituals difficult to observe. I was a natural-born rebel, while others, like my younger brother, were natural-born saints. We were born into the same family, had the same parents, the same upbringing, and yet we were so different.

We talk about good or moral human beings and about bad, immoral ones. But how does one become a good, moral person? Awhile back we would distinguish “nature” from “nurture”. In our natural state, we are automatically good—noble savages. But then civilization influences us, and we become selfish and bad. Freud turned this on its head and said that we are born selfish creatures, but we learn, or are taught by our parents and society, to control our ids.

Psychologists like Freud, Piaget, and Kohlberg developed theories about child development and how children come to make moral decisions. They differed as to what was most significant—evolution, the development of a child’s brain, interaction with other children and adults, a process of socialization. There were some, like Eysenck, who unfashionably argued that good and bad behavior were conditioned by one’s genetic makeup; there was such a thing as a criminal chromosome. And of course, a lot of crackpot pseudoscience, like racial theories and eugenics. Others focused anthropologically on how different tribes around the world developed their own rituals of conformity and socialization, which helped explain a lot of the rituals in the Torah we often find irrelevant or passé.

At this moment in time, as research into our genetic makeup is advancing in leaps and bounds, we are inclined to put more emphasis on the influence of our genes. Genes carry many different characteristics, both desirable and undesirable. That’s why we can inherit diseases. But there is a lot we do not know about what goes into genes and what exactly they can and do pass on. An ethical gene is not an impossibility. So, is being good or bad passed on through our genes? Are some people automatically good and others bad? We are still learning.

Jonathan Haidt in his book *The Righteous Mind* argues that “moral reasoning was mostly just a post hoc search for reasons to justify the judgments people had already made.” He uses an analogy of a rider on an elephant. The rider “reasons why” but the elephant “sees that” which represents emotion, intuition, and all the built-in factors that automatically get us to behave in a particular way. Which then we try to find reasons for. The just is out. Our societies are predicated on our knowing what is good (as defined by each society or religion or ideology). We act as if we have choice.

Socialization may explain why religious communities are successful in imposing conformity but not necessarily very good at getting many of its members to be moral human beings or to act correctly even by its own standards. Authority, whether it is parental, educational, or religious, is rarely effective in controlling human behavior. People usually behave well when someone else is looking—like a policeman. God is used so often to dissuade bad behavior because God is supposed to be the all-seeing eye. But then why do religious people who claim to believe in God and that God “sees” whatever they do, often behave badly? And often encourage killing in the name of religion or acting in coercive ways that most of us do not think are right and indeed much of religious ideology disagrees with?

Psychologists tell us that simply commanding people to be good rarely works. They must decide for themselves if they want to, if it is worth it. We punish in effect to express disapproval or sometimes simply prophylactically to protect society from dangerous people. The issue of whether we can change fundamental human behavior is debatable.

In fact, the old distinction between nature and nurture is still a pretty good one. We choose to abide by different laws—civil laws, religious laws, and personal moralities—for and through a variety of causes and effects. They all play a part. We are determined in part, and we are free in part. In the end, we as individuals make decisions in a variety of areas, even if there are laws that constrict us. Some of our decisions are predictable, some not.

In the meantime, what are we supposed to do? We punish criminals in the hope that they might change. We always have punished those who broke laws. But is this fair? Why did we even think punishment would get them to change?

Scolding is rarely effective. But presenting alternative models, alternative moralities, at least offers standards. There are standards for personal behavior, daily routines, and special days of the year. There are standards in every system and culture that applied historically in different times and some just as applicable now as then. Whether and how we choose to keep them is up to us. If one cares about being Jewish, the Torah provides a list of what comprises a Jewish way of life and a Jewish way of being good. It is one of several options and paradigms. Freedom of choice, if you like, is the freedom to decide which program we choose to be influenced by.

But this is one reason that I strongly support the separation of religion and state. I do believe religion should be part of the moral debate. But when religions gain power, they tend to exclude and suppress other ideologies. Actually, that’s what the nonreligious extremes like fascists and marxists try to do, too. It is happening on campuses all the time. I am right, and you are wrong. It is always important to have access to alternative ideas.

Judaism claims that we are born neutral, with a good inclination and a bad one. We decide which one we give preference to. We are influenced by our own actions—good ones reinforce the good in our nature, and bad ones reinforce the bad. We know we are determined by genes and societies. But we still show every sign of being able to make some choices, at least. We do in fact change religions, countries, and communities. And friends and partners.

I knew how I should have behaved, in the past and even now when I make mistakes. Sometimes I did what I should have, and sometimes I did not. That is the struggle of life. Augustine is said to have prayed, "Please God, make me good...but not just yet." I always prayed to God to make me good. I just didn't always try hard enough.

As R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto said hundreds of years ago in his introduction to *The Path of the Righteous*, there is nothing new, we know what we ought to do, but we need to be constantly reminded. The function of education (as opposed to indoctrination) is to inform, to present possibilities, to reiterate, and to encourage people to think and to decide for themselves. To teach rather than preach. That is the only defense against hucksters and fanatics.