

Good and Bad

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

We talk about good, moral human beings and about bad, immoral ones. But how does one become a good, moral person? Is it what society expects or private decision making? Either way why do we need Torah?

Nowadays many people argue that our genes decide for us whether we are "good" or "bad." The trouble is that if you are brought up as a Muslim, the chances are that you will probably feel and genuinely believe that Jews are bad and ought to be subjugated or removed. Did this come, does Antisemitism come from society or from genes?

In believe the answer is both. Genes are made up of lots of different matter, good and bad. That's why we can inherit diseases as well as looks, longevity and brains. But there is a lot we do not know about what goes into genes. Things called episomes can be affected by lots of internal and external factors. This might explain why certain character traits, characteristics of being Jewish might be passed on through our genes and why pathologies like prejudice continue. Is being good or bad passed on through our genes? Are some people automatically good and others bad? Can people change? Why don't we all "Love our neighbors" as the Torah tells us to this week?

Judaism always claimed that we are born neutral, with a good inclination and a bad one. And 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. But How do we learn to become moral beings? Clearly some people want to be better others don't.

Preaching, whether by parents, teachers or rabbis rarely makes a difference. We have to want to change. Usually only when faced with a crisis. Most people don't make moral decisions. The role of the Torah is to present us with alternative patterns of morality and behavior to society and selfish genes. We choose if they matter enough to us. Any good decision involves weighing up alternatives. This is why the Torah presents us with a range of ethical and practical laws and says if we really want to be good people, here is a menu of what it takes and how we should act.