

13 Ways To Become a Good Person: Jewish pointers on living a good and ethical life.

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The Torah holds a skeptical view of human nature. Disappointed by humankind's propensity for violence and dishonesty, God laments, "The tendency of man's heart is towards evil from his youth" (Genesis 8:21). In other words, we are born morally neutral, with strong inclinations toward evil.

In Jewish teachings, this "evil inclination" is not considered all bad. The rabbis of the Talmud taught that a good person should not endeavor to fully eradicate the yetzer hara, or evil inclination (the counter balance to the yetzer tov, the inclination for good), for within it resides the aggressive instincts that prompt creativity and achievement. Without the yetzer hara, the rabbis speculated, we would not engage in business, build homes, marry, or have children (Genesis Rabbah 9:7). So, for example, our motives for engaging in sexual relations might emanate from lust (yetzer hara) no less than love (yetzer tov), but out of such mixed motives something very pure, a new life, emerges.

From Judaism's perspective, therefore, greatness of character is not measured by our lack of an evil inclination, but by our success in controlling it. The rabbis of the Talmud also taught that "The greater the scholar, the greater his evil inclination" (Sukkah 52a). In other words, someone who possesses pronounced capabilities will find himself presented with a greater number of illicit opportunities around which he will have to exert considerable self-control. For example, it is a greater moral achievement for a person who has built up his business from scratch to remain scrupulously honest in his dealings than for one who has always been employed by another, for the latter has less to gain from financial chicanery. Similarly, it is a greater act of character for a person of good looks and a sensual disposition not to lead a promiscuous life than for one who does not possess this disposition and is afforded few such opportunities.

It is important for us to be aware of our own "evil" inclinations so we may channel them for good. For example, if we know we have a strong need to be admired, we might strive to become well-known for doing good deeds. Some people deride philanthropists who donate large sums of money to a university or hospital building campaign and insist that a building be named for them, but such behavior may demonstrate a proper amalgamation of both good and "evil" inclinations. The person's yetzer tov prompts her to contribute to a good cause, and she has channeled her yetzer hara's desire for acclaim into an activity that is worthy of it.

Developing Goodness

Judaism regards improving character as the goal of life. As the Midrash teaches, "The Torah's commandments were not given to humankind for any purpose other than to refine people" (Genesis Rabbah 44:1). Based on Jewish teachings, here are 13 paths towards becoming a person of goodness.

1. Do good deeds often. We become good people not by thinking good thoughts but by doing good deeds again and again, until they become part of our nature. Maimonides teaches that it is better to give needy recipients one gold coin on a thousand different occasions than to give someone a thousand gold coins all at the same time, for "if he opens up his hand again and again one thousand times, the trait of giving becomes part of him" (commentary on The Ethics of the Fathers 3:19).

2. Cultivate the friendship of people who are both good and wise. In his "Laws of Character Development" (6:1), Maimonides says, "It is in the nature of human beings to be influenced in their opinions and actions by their friends and neighbors....Therefore, a person should strive to become friendly with righteous people, and to stay in the presence of those who are wise, so that one will learn from their actions." Experiencing friendships like these and spending time among kind people will inspire us to want to become better. If, for example, we spend time in a household where the family members speak to each other in a consistently loving manner, it is likely that we--at least while we are with these people--will also speak in a calmer, more loving way.

The same wisdom applies when we seek out a new home. Whereas most of us chose a home based on its beauty, from a Jewish perspective it is more important to ascertain the character of the people who live in the neighborhood--the environment in which we and our children will live and the people with whom we will associate. The better their characters, the more likely we and our children will grow in goodness.

3. Avoid people with bad character and unkind dispositions. The Book of Psalms [1:1] states: "Fortunate is the person who doesn't follow the advice of the wicked, who doesn't associate with sinful people, and who doesn't spend time among scoffers." People with bad characters can easily influence us to become like them.

The contagious quality of bad character helps explain the phenomenon of children from "good homes" who engage in self-destructive and/or criminal behavior. Frequently they have been swayed by bad companions who exert a stronger influence.

4. Live up to the reputation to which you aspire. Judaism places great value on maintaining a good name. Even at the time when men dominated the household, the rabbis ruled that if a man forbade his wife from helping her neighbors, she could have a court compel him to grant her a divorce. Otherwise the woman would acquire a bad name among her neighbors (Ketubot 72a).

My grandfather, Rabbi Nissen Telushkin, used to advise people, "Don't be so concerned with being humble that you try to hide from others all knowledge of the good you do. It is good to be known as something of a tzaddik, a righteous person. If nothing else, you'll be afraid to do something bad because you'll fear that it will become known, and will harm your good name." In short, if you're proud to have a good name, you will never want to do something to sully your reputation.

5. See every act you do as one of great significance. Maimonides suggests that we regard ourselves as being equally balanced between good and evil, and the world itself as similarly

balanced. Thus, a single good act will tip the balance toward good in our own life, and in the world. Conversely, one bad deed will tip the balance toward evil ("Laws of Repentance" 3:4).

Criminologists know that when broken windows in a neighborhood remain unrepaired, crime, including violent crime, in the area increases; the shattered glass becomes a signal to potential offenders that this is a neighborhood where disorder is accepted and crime tolerated. Fixing broken windows can thereby tip the balance of the neighborhood toward more civil behavior; and ignoring such a seemingly minor detail might pave a path toward moral deterioration.

6. If you offer personal prayers to God for your own well-being and success, pray for others before you pray for yourself. Offering such prayers helps us develop greater empathy for others. Often, when we hear of someone else's hardship, we feel a momentary sense of sympathy and concern, but soon forget about it. But if, each morning, we spend a few minutes praying for others, their hardships and needs will remain fresh in our consciousness. In so doing, we may help them--such as the case of a man who prayed daily for his unemployed friend and was thus prompted to make a considerable effort to help him find work, and eventually his efforts paid off.

7. Cultivate and develop your moral strengths. Commenting on the verse "Follow the path of your heart" (Ecclesiastes 11:9), the nineteenth-century rabbinic scholar Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin (the Netziv) taught that each of us must find our own way of serving God. One person may carry out his Divine service and fulfill his life's mission primarily through Torah study, another through prayer, and a third by means of charity and acts of loving-kindness. Clearly, these are not mutually exclusive, but represent a person's primary focus. It is incumbent on each of us to discover the path for which we have a natural affinity and cultivate it. If, for example, you have the ability to listen to people, console them, and help them make decisions, you might choose to perform this mitzvah for others. Conversely, if you have a nervous or morose disposition, it would be wise not to choose bikur cholim (visiting the sick) as your particular mitzvah. Ask yourself what you can do best in the service of others. If, for example, you enjoy cooking, contribute a home-cooked meal to a housebound person.

8. Keep a daily "character journal" focusing exclusively on the area in which you wish to improve yourself. If we are honest and comprehensive in what we record, we will soon note patterns in the events that can provide insights into our inappropriate behaviors. For example, if we are prone to lashon hara (gossiping), we might realize that we are most apt to pass on personal information during lunchtime at work or dinnertime at home. By acquiring such awareness in advance, we can take steps to avoid such behavior in the future (see point 9). Keeping a journal will help us to lead the kind of life we want, instead of allowing ourselves to be controlled by emotions and impulses.

9. When trying to correct a bad trait, temporarily embrace the opposite extreme. As a medieval commentator on Maimonides explains, "To strengthen a bent bamboo cane, we [must] bend it in the opposite direction, until it bounces back to the middle. If we bend it back only to the middle, it will remain permanently misshapen."

Although going to extremes is usually counterproductive, sometimes we need to do so for the short term to achieve balance. For example, if you have a tendency to gossip about other people's

faults, for the next week do not allow yourself to say anything bad about anyone, even if it is well-intentioned. If you tend towards stinginess, over the next few months, donate one or two of your best garments to an organization that helps the poor.

10. Avoid even sins that seem minor because, as a rabbinic maxim teaches, "One sin will lead to another" (The Ethics of the Fathers 4:2). The Bible teaches that King Ahab violated the Tenth Commandment by coveting the vineyard of a man named Navot which adjoined his winter palace. He offered to buy the land, but Navot refused and Ahab returned home depressed. When his wife, Queen Jezebel, learned of his upset, she arranged for two witnesses to offer perjured testimony that Navot had cursed both God and king, a capital crime for which Navot was executed and his estate confiscated. Jezebel then rushed to her husband with the happy news: "Come take possession of the vineyard of Navot...for Navot is no longer alive; he is dead" (I Kings 21).

What began with Ahab's violation of the Tenth Commandment against coveting quickly led to violations of the Ninth Commandment (against bearing false witness), the Sixth Commandment (against murder), and the Eighth Commandment (against stealing).

11. When confronted with a situation that leaves you uncertain as to whether you are taking the right action, ask yourself one question: "What is motivating me to act in this way, my yetzer tov (good inclination) or my yetzer hara (evil inclination)?" Just answering this question will usually determine the appropriate course of action.

12. Look at your life from the future. As moral educator Michael Josephson teaches: "If you want to know how to live your life, think about what you would like people to say about you after you die--then live backwards."

All of us can strive to leave a legacy of goodness. As the rabbis taught, "Righteous people are even greater after their deaths than in their lives" (Chullin 7b). Those who leave a legacy of goodness affect not only their own generation, but succeeding ones.

I was raised on the story of my maternal grandfather, Abraham Resnick, who acquired an apartment building during the 1920s. When the stock market crashed in 1929, he lost his savings, many of his apartments became vacant, and the remaining tenants could pay rent only sporadically. One time, my mother went with my grandfather to collect rents. Inside one apartment, a man was seated with his wife and children. "Mr. Resnick," he said to my grandfather, "we haven't eaten in two days." My grandfather handed my mother several dollars (a large sum of money for them during those difficult times), and told her to go out and buy groceries. My mother returned with bags filled with food which they gave to the family.

This incident occurred more than seventy years ago, yet this story continues to affect me. It is now known to my children, who heard it from my mother and who, God willing, will continue to be influenced by their great-grandfather's kindness even a hundred years after it happened.

13. Emulate God. God represents the ultimate biblical model for character building. Deuteronomy 13:5 commands that "you should walk after God." The Talmud asks, "How is it

possible for a person to walk after God? This is what the verse means: You should follow the attributes of the Holy One, blessed be He." For example, the Talmud says, just as God clothed Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:21), so should we clothe those who lack adequate clothing; just as God visited Abraham when he was weak (Genesis 18:1), so should we visit the sick; just as God buried Moses (Deuteronomy 34:6), so should we help arrange for the burial of the dead.

Over three thousand years ago, God said to Abraham, the first Jew, "and you shall be a blessing" [in the lives of those with whom you come in contact; Genesis 12:2]. If we take to heart these age-old Jewish teachings, we too, like Abraham, will become a blessing in the lives of all those with whom we come in contact, and in our own lives as well.

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5 Common Character Weaknesses

1. Insatiability. The desire for more--more money, more possessions, more acclaim, more sexual partners--is a common weakness in human nature, motivating much criminal, wrongful, and unholy behavior. Since it is natural for most of us to want far more than we have, the fact that we don't have many things that we desire is not a sign that we are leading a deprived life; rather, it is more likely a sign that we want too much.

2. Rationalizing. Using our ability to reason to justify a wrong is a common, and unworthy, human characteristic. Wrong as it is to act immorally, it is an additional sin to convince ourselves that what we are doing is right. For example, it is preferable to admit that "I bought a dress to wear for a wedding, and then I returned it, but I know that Jewish law forbids my doing so" than to rationalize: "A lot of people do this, and besides, who was hurt by my action?" More than any other character flaw, rationalization makes repentance and self-improvement impossible.

3. Initiating arguments. Many of us argue and advocate wrongful positions for no other reason than the perverse desire to dispute any assertion made by those we regard as opponents (this is particularly common among religious and political disputants). After all, an assertion is not necessarily false because our enemy says so, or true because our friend says so.

In recognition of this tendency, the Talmud legislates that "Two scholars who hate one another must not sit together as judges in the same case" (Sanhedrin 29a). Maimonides explains: "Such a thing brings about a perverted judgment. Because of the hatred they bear one another, each will be inclined to prove the other wrong" ("Laws of the Sanhedrin," 23.7).

Are there people who so annoy or antagonize you that the moment you hear them assert something, your mind starts searching for arguments to refute it? Before taking up the argument,

make sure you would feel the same way about the position had it been expressed by someone you liked.

4. Refusing to acknowledge mistakes. The refusal to admit an error causes us to persist in wrong and/or foolish behavior. As an old proverb teaches, "One who makes a mistake and doesn't correct it is making a second mistake."

5. Indifference to someone else's suffering. The Talmud records that Rabbi Judah, the editor of the Mishnah, had difficulty feeling compassion for people who were ignorant about Judaism. Once, during a famine, he arranged for food to be made available only to hungry people who were knowledgeable in Torah. When one of his students, who didn't wish to profit from his Jewish learning, went to Rabbi Judah in disguise and pretended to be a total ignoramus, Rabbi Judah refused to give him any food; finally, the man begged to be fed as one would feed a dog and Rabbi Judah relented. After the man departed, Rabbi Judah regretted that he had given food to an ignoramus, but when he learned it was his own student, he changed his attitude. "Let everyone enter [the storehouse]," he announced (Bava Bathra 8a).

No excuses: When someone is in need of help, we should extend it.

—Joseph Telushkin

Questioning Your Character

In order to struggle successfully with yourself, you must know your character intimately, and be aware of your faults. To achieve this self-awareness, sit down with pen and paper--this exercise will be painful--and write down what you feel are your most obvious character flaws and weaknesses:

- * Am I prone to anger? When I am angry, do I overreact and say or do things that inflict pain on others? Or am I the sort of person who, if asked, will deny that I am angry, yet will treat other people with coldness, disdain, and annoyance?
- * Do I judge others fairly, or am I harshly critical (both in what I say and what I think)?
- * Am I stingy with my money or my time?
- * Do I speak curtly, making people feel that I have no time for them? (This is unkind, even if we are busy.)
- * Do I avoid saying or doing what I believe is right because I fear how others will react or what they will think of me? (The question we should ask ourselves is not "What will others think of me?" but "What does God want me to do?")
- * Am I moody?
- * Do I make people around me feel that they are somehow responsible for my moods?
- * Does my unhappiness affect the atmosphere in my home, transforming, often in a matter of minutes, a general feeling of pleasantness and goodwill into one of tension and sadness? (Taking away the good mood of those around us and lowering their spirits is a cruel, even if unintentional, act of aggression.)
- * Do I treat strangers with more consideration than members of my own family?

* Do I take other people's kind behavior for granted, or do I go out of my way to express thanks and help those who have been kind to me?

* Do I blame my wrongful actions and mistakes on others, or do I take responsibility for the wrong I do?

* Do I jump to conclusions and blame other people before I know all the facts?

* Am I able to control my impulses, or do I give in to temptation easily?

* Do I bear grudges and remain angry at others for a long time after an argument?

* Am I tardy, and thereby waste other people's time by keeping them waiting?

* Do I rationalize dishonesty with excuses such as "Business is different"?

* When I hear of other people's sufferings or misfortunes, do I find ways to help them, or do I feel sadness in my heart but do nothing?

* Am I jealous of the success of others? Do I begrudge others their good fortune?

Once you have drawn up your list, do not become discouraged, even if you find that you have many weaknesses. Drawing up a list like this is the first and most important step in changing your character for the better.

—Joseph Telushkin