

DEFINING GOOD

by Rabbi Aron Tendler

Is there a single characteristic that by itself qualifies a person as "good?" All of us have good and bad mannerisms and it is the sum total of our behavior that usually defines us as good or bad. My question searches for a single mannerism or behavior that would characterize a person as "good" without knowing anything else about him or her. Is there such a defining characteristic?

This week's two Parshios conclude Sefer Bamidbar. Over the years I have attempted to understand why the specific laws and incidents in Mattos and Masei were selected to conclude the fourth book of the Torah. First we must establish what was the overall theme of Sefer Bamidbar.

Rabbi S.R. Hirsch explained the theme of each book in the Torah. 1. Bereishis identified the family of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yakov as separate from the rest of the nations. 2. Shemos explained that the Jews were separated and chosen from the rest of the nations in order to receive the Torah and become teachers to the rest of humanity. 3. Vayikra outlined the ideal lifestyle of the nation chosen to be G-d's "kingdom of priests and holy nation." 4. Sefer Bamidbar is a record of how the Chosen Nation related to the "ideal of its calling as outlined in the Third Book." (Rav Hirsch - Bamidbar 1:1) 5. Divarim is a compendium of laws that provided for the Chosen Nation's transition out of the desert and into the Promised Land.

If Vayikra presented the ideal life style of the Jewish nation and Bamidbar presented the struggles of the Jews as they attempted to integrate G-d's laws and expectations into their lives, it makes sense that Sefer Bamidbar should conclude with a real and attainable example of that ideal.

Given that the purpose for separating the Jews from the other nations was to accept the Torah and by following its laws become teachers and role models to the other nations of what G-d meant when He said, "Let us make the human in our image and form," Bamidbar should conclude with a real, and attainable description of that intended human.

Good and bad are not arbitrary terms. Good is defined as that which G-d wishes and commands, or anything that helps to accomplish G-d's wishes and commands. Bad is defined as anything willful that challenges or contradicts G-d's wishes and commands or anything that willfully interferes with accomplishing G-d's wishes and commands.

If the human was intended to be in the form and image of G-d, and G-d is the source and definition of all that is "good," then the human was intended to emulate G-d and be "good." Therefore, the real, and attainable description of that "intended good human" should be described in this week's double

Parshios that conclude Sefer Bamidbar.

"And Moshe spoke to the Bnai Yisroel saying: This is the word that G-d has commanded. If a man takes a vow he must not permit his word to remain unfulfilled; he shall do whatever has come forth from his mouth." (30:2-3)

My Grandfather Zt'l points out that these laws were introduced to the Jews in an unusual manner. In most instances, whenever a new law was taught to the nation the law was introduced with, "And G-d spoke to Moshe and said, Speak to the Bnai Yisroel" or some such formulation. However, the beginning of this week's Parsha introduced the laws of vows and oaths and did not associate them with G-d first speaking to Moshe and telling him to relate the laws to the nation. Instead, it appears as if Moshe decided to teach the laws of oaths and vows on his own.

My Grandfather explains that there is no question that the laws of vows and oaths were commanded by G-d to Moshe. However, the reason it does not state that G-d first told Moshe to do so is to emphasize the importance of "he must not permit his word to remain unfulfilled; he shall do whatever has come forth from his mouth."

The free willed human created in the form and image of the Divine is the only creature gifted with speech. Speech is therefore uniquely human. The Torah is telling us that fulfilling an oath or vow is an obligation that is integral to our moral and ethical code even if not expressly stated or commanded. Fulfilling vows and oaths is a direct reflection of having been created in the form and image of G-d.

In Parshas Balak, Bilam's second blessing contained the following contrasting description of G-d. (22:19) G-d is not a man that He should be deceitful. Would He say and not do, or speak and not confirm?"

To emulate G-d is to speak the truth and do as we promise. To make oaths and vows and not do as we promised desecrates G-d in Whose image and form we were created!

My Grandfather further notes that the Torah does not insist that "false witnesses - Aydim Zomemim" be forewarned as a prerequisite for punishment. In all other instances a sinner cannot be punished unless he or she is first forewarned by two witnesses that they are intending to do something that is both wrong and punishable. The law of "Hasraah - forewarning" does not apply to false witnesses. He explained that false witnesses are punished even when there was no forewarning because it is understood and by all humans that it is evil to give false testimony. There is no such defense as, "I didn't know offering false testimony was against the law." Everyone knows that false testimony is wrong!

I would like to suggest that the proper use of speech is the only independent criterion that proves a person's goodness. If you meet a person who is careful not to speak Lashon Harah (slander), and who always does as he or she say they will do, and who speaks with respect to all people, you can

be certain that you have met a good person.

As G-d's chosen kingdom of priests and holy nation, Moshe summed up the essence of our mission with the words, "he must not permit his word to remain unfulfilled; he shall do whatever has come forth from his mouth." Integrity, discipline, dignity and respect in speech should be a standard for all people and all societies. Speech is a Divine quality separating the human from the animal. In relation to the other nations it is the single criterion that can independently guarantee our acceptance by them as G-d's chosen teachers and role models.

"Who is the one that desires a life of goodness? He who restrains his tongue from evil and his lips from speaking deceit. Turn from evil and do good, seek and pursue peace."

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