

child. Almost invariably, we will end up spending more money than we had planned and more time on details that do not ultimately matter. Strive to balance that time and energy with creating moments for the child and yourself that acknowledge the significance of the moment. Those moments and that recognition should be our bar/bat mitzvah gift to ourselves.

## EXODUS/SHEMOT: ON BEING A *MENTSCH*

In the old days, proverbially, a boy would begin his bar mitzvah speech with the words “Today I am a man.” What does Judaism have to say about being an adult? The answer can be summed up by the Yiddish word *mentsch*, “a decent human being.”

Who are we as human beings? We exist because of a choice—a choice by God to create the world. The world was created unfinished, incomplete, and flawed. God created humans to be partners in the completion of the world. Who better than humans, who are of this world and yet are created in God’s likeness, to finish the work of creation?

What are we to do? What is asked of us?

Something both simple and immensely complex—to be a *mentsch*, a caring, ethical human being.

Maimonides (the great medieval Jewish thinker), near the beginning of his code, the *Mishneh Torah*, sets out the prime directive: *ve-halakhta be-drakhav*, “you should walk in God’s ways.” This is how we are to journey through the world.

We are always to remember that we are created in God’s image. As the rabbis said: “Just as God is kind so should you be kind; just as God is merciful so should you be merciful; just as God is holy so should you be holy” (Talmud, *Shabbat* 133b).

Maimonides says: “There are many different attributes. One person is temperamental and always angry, another is very even tempered and is never angry, one is arrogant, another humble, lustful or pure, etc.” (1:1—all references are to the *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilkhot Da’ot*, chapter and section, unless otherwise noted).

We thus have characteristics that are both hereditary and acquired. For Maimonides the right path, God's way, is that of the middle ground. We should "neither be easily angered nor be like one dead that does not feel" (1:4).

We should try to live a simple life. "Don't desire except those things your body needs, that without them you could not live. Do not become obsessed with your work. Remember its basic purpose is to secure the necessities of life" (1:4). How do we achieve this middle path, the way of balance? We are to repeat a measured response over and over until it becomes a part of us.

Maimonides uses the image of a sick person to explain why we do not all follow his measured way. When we are sick, our senses are distorted. We perceive the bitter as sweet and the sweet as bitter. We want to eat things that are not good for us. So too when souls are sick. They desire and love bad ideas, and reject that which is healthy, the good path. It is easy for them to continue on as they have, even though this has been bad for them.

Maimonides sets out a method of change through behavior modification. He believes that if a person has an extreme quality, such as stinginess, that person should behave in a way that is the opposite extreme—that is, be very generous. One extreme will uproot the other and the person will then be able to follow the middle path.

Maimonides understood that motivation is the key to all our actions. We can be long-suffering not because we strive not to be angry but because we are passive. While a rabbinic maxim states: "Who is rich? A person who is satisfied with his lot," Maimonides knew self-satisfaction could be an excuse for laziness.

Maimonides adds: "In your quest for the middle ground, to avoid lust or envy, do not say I won't eat good food, or marry. This is an evil way. . . . One who follows that path is a sinner" (3:1). The Talmud teaches: "Isn't it enough for you what the Torah has forbidden, that you should want to forbid additional things to yourself?" (Jerusalem Talmud, *Nedarim* 9:1). Or as Kohelet/Ecclesiastes (7:16) said: "Don't be too big a *tzaddik*, a righteous person, and don't be too wise."

Maimonides' vision is just one vision of the *darkhei hashem*, "the

path of God," on which we are called to travel. Even within Jewish tradition, there are other models.

In Hasidism, for example, humans are perceived as more dynamic in character. Therefore, a golden mean is not only an impossible goal to achieve, but also perhaps not even the correct goal. Rather than searching for the perfect balance between opposite qualities, the Hasidic model elevates our ability to make the appropriate choice in a particular circumstance. This is more in line with the words of Kohelet (3:1ff): "There is a time and place for every thing under heaven. A time to be born and a time to die . . . a time to love and a time to hate. . . ."

In this model, there is a time to be angry and a time to be placating, a time to be generous and a time to hold back. In the ebb and flow of life, we are often stuck in one place—too often angry; too often generous; too often scared.

We tend to abrogate choice, acting instead in a routine created from our past. The task then is to try to see clearly, to be aware, to avoid the kind of confusion described by Isaiah: "Ah, those who call evil good and good evil; Who present darkness as light and light as darkness" (Isa. 5:20).

In the world of creation, God's first act is to separate light from darkness. And yet we can only see light because of the contrasting darkness. We live our mortal lives knowing that darkness inevitably follows light. Both light and darkness are necessary, and together they help us see.

We strive to gain clarity, sight, and insight even as we know it will pass, knowing we will achieve clarity only for a brief moment.

We live in a world of differentiation, a world of *havdalot*, "separations," that give us perspective. We need to see that this is the nature of our world; perhaps we need even to celebrate these separations. Even as we try to repair the world, to restore it to its unity, the world continues to exist with its unbelievable diversity. God, as the underlying unity, gives affirmation and value to all people and all things, even to anger and pride.

God then calls upon us as our first act of creation to become aware, to see clearly, to separate the light from the darkness, and to accept

the knowledge that darkness will always be present until the end of time.

And in that awareness, we must remember that we are to be merciful as God is merciful, for all humans are created in God's image. We are taught *kavod ha-beriot*, "respect and honor for all human beings." For we are truly all equal, all created in the image of the One, all descendants of one set of parents. As different and as unique (and as problematic) as each of us is, we all share the bonds of our humanity, because we are all God's creatures.

What is the most important verse in the Torah?

Rabbi Akiva said: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." This is a great principle of the Torah. Ben Azzai disagreed: The verse "This is the book of the descendants of Adam . . . the human whom God made in God's likeness" (Gen. 5:1) utters a principle even greater. [Jerusalem Talmud, *Nedarim* 9:4, 41c]

Why does Ben Azzai find such an obvious choice as "love your neighbor as yourself" inadequate? Perhaps, quite simply, because some people don't know how to love themselves. Perhaps because it demands too much of us—to love *everybody*! Or perhaps Ben Azzai thinks that the simple statement of human existence is enough: "This is the record of Adam's descendants." For as we look in the face of another human being, we see the image of God, the image of all God's creatures who have ever existed. Ultimately, we are looking in a mirror and seeing our own face. Through the realization that we are all equal, both in our humanity and in our having been created in the image of God, we learn to treat the other with respect and with kindness.

## LEVITICUS/VA-YIKRA: RELATIONSHIPS AND SEXUALITY

As the exhilaration of leaving Egypt behind wears off, we struggle with the day-to-day challenges of our journey to the Promised Land. We are excited by being on our own and at the same time worried about being all alone. The challenge of Leviticus is how to create the structures that will aid us on our travels. One of those "structures" is having a clear goal that is kept always before you. For Leviticus that goal is to live a life of holiness. "You shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Lev. 19:6).

In the Bible, holiness is a quality ascribed to God. Nothing else is intrinsically holy—not a mountain or a sacred grove (see "Eating and Food," pp. 66–93). In the teaching quoted in the previous chapter that we should be merciful as God is merciful, we are also told to be holy as God is holy. While it is clear what being merciful means, it is not very clear what it means to be holy. It is not even clear what it means for God to be holy. This teaching in fact suggests that holiness is not a quality but a way of acting, like being merciful. Holiness is what brings all those qualities together: merciful, forgiving, forbearing, acting justly. Holiness is acting with a consciousness that there is a right way to behave and to respond.

The Book of Leviticus sets out in great detail the striving for holiness. It includes laws of impurity related to bodily emissions, the dietary laws of keeping kosher, and ethical laws such as loving your neighbor. In Leviticus, these laws help us to achieve holiness and reject impurity. What is their context in the Book of Leviticus? What is the context of Leviticus itself? In the Book of Exodus, we have left home and have