

# *The Reconstructionist*

Volume 69, Number 2, Spring 2005

## Table of Contents

- 2      **From the Editor**
- Jewish Ethics: Theory and Practice**
- 4      *David A. Teutsch*, Reinvigorating the Practice of Contemporary  
Jewish Ethics: A Justification for Values-Based Decision Making
- 16     *Brant Rosen*, Forging Connections:  
Report from Natandome Village, Uganda
- 24     *Anne Underwood*, Clergy Sexual Misconduct:  
An Issue of Ethics and Justice
- 31     *Mordechai Liebling*, The Jewish Basis for Shareholder Activism
- 35     *Christina Ager*, Every Day Ethics: God is in the Details
- 41     *Moti Rieber*, Simplicity as a Jewish Value: Reclaiming and  
Reconstructing Sumptuary Legislation
- 49     *Jonathan Brumberg-Kraus*, What Is Religious about Ethics?
- Viewpoint**
- 58     *Deborah Waxman*, The Emergence of an Icon: *Yahrtzeit* Plaques  
in 20th-Century American Judaism
- Book Reviews**
- 76     *Natan Fenner*, A Guide for the End of Life  
Review of *Behoref Hayamim/In the Winter of Life: A Values-Based  
Jewish Guide for Decision Making at the End of Life*,  
edited by David Teutsch and Deborah Waxman
- 86     *Nina Mandel*, Responding to Interfaith  
Review of *Introducing My Faith and My Community: The Jewish  
Outreach Guide for the Christian in a Jewish Interfaith Relationship*,  
by Kerry M. Olitzky and *Interfaith Families: Personal Stories of  
Jewish-Christian Interfaith*, by Jane Kaplan
- 91     *Sheila Peltz Weinberg*, Eternal Questions, Prayerful Responses  
Review of *Filling Words with Light: Hasidic and Mystical Reflections  
on Jewish Prayer*, by Lawrence Kushner and Nehemiah Polen

## FROM THE EDITOR

The relationship between religion and ethics is venerable, if complex. It is difficult to find a religious tradition that does not, in some way, embody an ethical perspective as well as specific ethical prescriptions and proscriptions.

Jewish tradition is no different. The ancient rabbinic authorities differed as to whether the 613 commandments of the Torah tradition could be parsed into those *bayn adam l'makom* (“ritual”) and those *bayn adam l'havero* (“ethical”), but the fact that they evolved such categories at least tells us that the ethical could be expected to be found within the larger context of the religious.

When the Reform movement in Judaism developed in the 19th century, it attempted to remake Judaism into a religious creed in place of the civilization of a national group. “Ethical monotheism” became the banner under which the new Reform ideology organized. The ritual regulations were reduced in significance, or even in some cases eliminated, while the ethical imperatives of the Prophets (if not always the ethical “laws” of the Torah) were elevated.

As Mordecai Kaplan noted in *The Future of the American Jew* (1948), the traditional Jewish perspective on ethics presumed a supernatural God and a divinely-revealed Torah. As Creator, God was the measure of right and wrong; as a reliable record of revelation, the Torah embodied God’s expectations (and a Jew’s obligations) with regard to proper behavior. Under the impact of modernity, both of those presumptions were challenged.

The difference between our fathers’ attitude to the Torah and that which we today must take is this: They assumed that the Torah was perfect and its value realized through obedience and conformity with its standards; we should see in it the beginning of an eternal quest which we must continue. *We can discover value in the Torah by utilizing it as a living tradition, a sort of collective memory of valuable experience.* [M]odern Jews can use the Torah for inspiration and guidance, even though they cannot commit themselves blindly to an acceptance of all its teachings (p. 346; italics in original).

The liberal religious project of trying to discover and agree upon ethical principles in the absence of certainty about Scripture and the nature of God is related to that aspect of philosophy that strives to establish moral postulates and ethical imperatives on the basis of reason rather than revelation. Contemporary religion shares the concern of classical religion that standards of right behavior be established and maintained. But in the absence of orthodox faith, a degree of the relative and the tentative is introduced into moral discourse.

It is this absence of ultimate authority that agitates religious as well as cultural fundamentalists — those for whom there can only be one right way of being, of doing and of living. For those adhering to this type of creed, pluralism necessar-

ily implies relativism, and relativism is portrayed as an invitation to immorality.

Reconstructionist Judaism has tried to ground ethical imperatives in places other than a belief in revelation. In *Exploring Judaism: A Reconstructionist Approach*, Rabbis Rebecca Alpert and Jacob Staub write:

But if Reconstructionists don't view texts and traditions as authoritative, how can we be guided by them? Through the workings of community. Reconstructionist communities seek to counter the cultural bias in North America that places a supreme value on individualism, personal autonomy, and privacy. It is not the case that a person's ethical behavior is nobody else's business. If Judaism is a civilization, then how you conduct your business, how you treat or mistreat people, and how much or little you contribute your time and money to community building and social action *matter as much* as how you pray . . . People do the right thing not because they are commanded to do so, but rather because they are influenced by and feel responsible to other members of the community (2d edition, pp. 98-99; italics in original).

The challenge of formulating a contemporary Jewish ethics continues to be both provocative and stimulating.

### **In This Issue**

In this issue we present a series of perspectives on ethics, dealing with both theory and practice, which pick up various aspects of the modern and post-modern discussion about the relationship between ethics and religion.

We also are pleased to offer in the "Viewpoint" section a thoughtful historical analysis of one of the common symbols of synagogue architecture, the memorial plaque. The evolution of this symbol is shown to reflect the historical development of the American Jewish community.

In the "Book Reviews" section, we have, appropriately for this issue, included a review of a recent publication on end-of-life decision making published by the Center for Jewish Ethics at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College. We also feature reviews of new books on issues of intermarriage and on hasidic and mystical insights on prayer.

### **Our 70th Anniversary**

Our next issue (Fall 2005) will celebrate the 70th anniversary of *The Reconstructionist*, with a series of articles, analyses and reflections on the past, present and future of Reconstructionist Judaism.

—Richard Hirsh

# Reinvigorating the Practice of Contemporary Jewish Ethics: A Justification For Values-Based Decision Making

BY DAVID A. TEUTSCH

Often described as a way of life, Judaism must shape the everyday conduct of Jews to deserve that description. But in our time Jewish approaches to moral thought and action do not usually shape the lives of American Jews. This essay discusses how we reached this situation, the nature of moral action, and what we can do to reinvigorate Jewish moral engagement.

Historians and philosophers agree that it is a mistake to equate law and ethics. The Jewish concept of *lifnim meshurat hadin* implies that one must often go beyond the letter of the law to achieve fully moral conduct. Nonetheless law in a society generally embodies at least minimal moral standards.

In pre-modern Jewish communities *halakha*, Jewish law, was an integral part of Jewish culture, and *minhag* (custom) that supported it shaped much of daily living. For Jews in that pre-modern world, *halakha* defined the way

that Jews did many things, so a theological justification was not that important. Living together reinforced Jewish conduct and values. Self-governance and the institutions of the *kehilla* (organized community) strengthened the coherence of that culture and its capacity to sustain itself.

With modernity came secular citizenship, and with it the end of the pre-modern, self-governing Jewish community. *Halakha* and *minhag* had been evolving to meet the changing needs of the community because of the natural social regulation characteristic of communities. Secular citizenship disrupted that evolution, immersed Jews in modern society, and shattered the community that had provided the context for absorbing Jewish precepts and living by Jewish ethics.

## Loss of Organic Community

The loss of that organic community

---

Dr. David A. Teutsch is the Director of the Center for Jewish Ethics and Myra and Louis Wiener Professor of Contemporary Jewish Civilization at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College.

radically altered the course of Jewish life. Suddenly *minhag* and *halakha* were optional, not obligatory. Whether to follow them became a question, the response to which gave rise to the modern Jewish religious movements, each with a different ideology describing the relationships between God, the Jewish people and Torah. Neither modern Orthodoxy nor any of the liberal movements, however, arrested Jewish assimilation. Jewish acculturation to America involved education, clothing, language, cultural and recreational activities — all the elements of daily life. As connection to Jewish community and culture eroded in people's lives, so did the presence of Jewish practice and ethics.

Reinvigorating Jewish ethics is critical to the future of Jewish culture, to the relevance of Judaism to contemporary Jews, and to the positive influence of Judaism in the world. But how can that be accomplished? What is the ground of moral life, and given the current nature of American Jewish life, what is a plausible moral decision-making process?

### Legitimation and Truth Claims

One major strand of Jewish tradition holds, paradoxically, that the Jewish people heard only the *alef* of *Anokhi*<sup>1</sup> at Mt. Sinai. They waited to hear the rest of Torah from their leader Moses and his successors. The ineffable experience Jewish tradition connects to Sinai is the claimed origin and legitimation for Jewish tradition. Such experience, regardless of its origin, is always experienced as powerful and life-changing. The powerful experience that

anchors our sense of truth and reality is perhaps beyond culture, beyond intellectualization, and beyond language to express accurately, even though it profoundly shapes each of these. Such experience in our own lives extends and reinvigorates both the Sinai metaphor and our confidence in our own moral legitimation.

While many of us anchor ourselves in what we believe to be a transcendent ground of truth, we cannot escape our own human experience, which is limited by our physical finitude, limited by the constraints of our senses and minds and by the complicated interaction between thoughts, feelings and the culture in which we are located. Philosophers in previous generations assumed they were working to describe objective reality.

More recently, we have come to face that we cannot legitimately claim to know objective reality. Located as we are solely within the human experience, we necessarily settle for something less. We now recognize that people base their claims about objectivity on their capacity to reach agreements about what they believe is true that include the largest possible number of people and cultures. The broadest possible inter-subjective agreement is as close to objectivity as we can come.

The idea of objectivity emerged from the development of culture in general and from philosophy in particular. As with many ideas, the limitations of the idea of objectivity emerged only after the idea had been in use for centuries. Many people feel secure in their belief that they can know objec-

tive truth. For them the loss of that belief can be profoundly disturbing. People often prefer to believe in the effortless clarity of black-and-white truth. The lack of certainty is a source of insecurity. Efforts to increase certainty consume considerable energy and absorb a great deal of attention. However, in order to think clearly we must recognize the limits of our knowledge. Recognizing our intellectual limits brings us closer to truth.

### Search for Objective Truth

Classical moral philosophy sought to arrive at statements about the right and the good that are objectively true for all times, places and people. That concern has continued into our own day, represented by such contemporary work as John Rawls' *A Theory of Justice*.<sup>2</sup> Rawls is concerned with developing principles for creating a just society. Those principles, he asserts, ought to work in any society in any time and place.

Moral philosophers like Rawls talk about how a rational person would act. They can perhaps give parameters for governments, but this does not work in the same way for the decisions of individuals and small groups, with their particular tastes, histories and concerns. Rawls' work is strikingly devoid of particular small-scale applications. Furthermore, science has gradually forced us to recognize that the "purely rational person" does not exist. Our biochemistry, emotions, intellects, spirit, brains, sensory experience, minds, societal inputs and intuition can be talked

about as if they were separate, but they are actually always highly interactive.<sup>3</sup> Each is shaped by the others in ways that are extraordinarily complicated and far from fully understood. We do not yet even have good explanations for why one of these factors seems to dominate the others at different moments in our lives.<sup>4</sup> We do know that this does not happen in the manner that the affected individuals regard as optimal, and we often have less control over these shifts than most of us would like.

Scientists and social scientists share awareness of the complexities of the brain and limitations of rationality. That awareness requires us to think afresh about what we are trying to accomplish through moral discourse. Simply put, it is not enough for us to achieve a high level of moral reasoning. We engage in moral discourse to discover moral action in order to act morally. From my outcome-driven perspective, our moral dialogue needs to lead us to actually doing good and doing right, or it is a failure.

### Moral Reasoning

The work of Lawrence Kohlberg portrays six levels of moral reasoning.<sup>5</sup> His theory was that if moral reasoning could be improved, conduct would follow. It was quite shocking when his critics laid out hard research that showed there is little correlation between the level of reasoning achieved and the kind of action taken.<sup>6</sup> Simply put, knowing what is right doesn't necessarily lead to doing it.<sup>7</sup> People can be selfish in the pursuit of their narrow

self-interest. They can be self-indulgent, cruel or self-serving, often without a qualm. Moral reasoning by itself clearly does not sufficiently motivate an individual to act on its conclusions. Fortunately, human beings do not make most of their decisions in social isolation. We depend not as much on moral reasoning as on moral examples, social pressure and social convention to shape our conduct.

This recognition is embedded in the Jewish critique of Kierkegaard's portrayal of the Abraham of the *Akeda* as a "lonely knight of faith." Jews have traditionally seen Abraham not as a lonely knight — an isolated individual in relationship exclusively with God — but rather as a human being with relationships with family, clan and tribe. Indeed, other people — for most of us, our parents — taught us to walk and talk through example and interaction. Without relationships we would never have learned to talk; we would never have become acculturated. And of course each culture is composed of the accretions of generations that children unselfconsciously absorb through their families and peers. Relationships and cultural absorption are profoundly intertwined.

Our moral decisions and actions never happen outside the context of relationship and culture.<sup>8</sup> Quite the contrary! Everything that we understand about ourselves we understand *because* of our relationships and culture. We are not objective *because* we are rooted in these aspects of the human experience.

As far back as anthropologists can trace, human beings existed in clans

and tribes. In order to get along, they took cues from each other as to language, thought and action. From infancy people learn to act the way they do from others, and they are constantly receiving feedback from each other. The human species has been successful because people are capable of harmonizing with each other and coordinating their efforts to accomplish the tasks required to create culture and do work. The ability to adapt and interact is part of the human evolutionary advantage. It is also why we cannot legitimately deal with human behavior without looking at its interpersonal setting.

### Role of Society and Culture

Society and culture play a major role in shaping our wants and desires. People are too complex to be totally predictable, and sometimes they innovate or rebel in ways that bring sweeping changes. Nevertheless, society and culture generally shape our expectations of our own actions and those of others, providing the context for our moral decisions. It is our culture, refracted through family and other groups, that shapes the moral universe within which we live. Of course in contemporary culture, most people are part of several groups and multiple cultures. This multiplies their identity choices and behavioral options, creating significant internal tensions, a challenge to which I return later in this essay.

During much of its history, moral philosophy attempted to ask what an individual ought to do without con-

sidering the individual's cultural context. From the perspective that I have described above, answering that question is not terribly useful, which is fortunate because for the most part it is a question that is impossible to answer. The critical question is what a particular individual embedded in a particular social setting at a particular moment should do. The complex social setting with its particularities of economics, family structure, rituals, customs and relationships provides the setting within which we function and shapes the choices we make.

### Evolution of Morals

Let me give an example. One current theory about cultural evolution is that patriarchy developed along with the emergence of elaborate agriculture that required the use of implements so heavy that only men could effectively wield them. Patriarchy in this reading is historically located. It is not an accident that in post-industrial societies, where virtually all jobs can be done interchangeably by either men or women, patriarchy has begun to give way to gender equality.

In our post-modern cultural setting, liberal Jews agree that sexism and support for patriarchy are moral errors, but to accuse the families living in those early agricultural settlements of moral error because they were patriarchal does not make very much sense. On the other hand, retaining patriarchal structures when they are no longer economically or socially justifiable is immoral because it violates the principle of equal

opportunity (and as a Jew, I would add the principle of *b'tselem elohim*, that human beings are all equally in the divine image). Thus, our morals evolve because the conditions in which they function evolve. There are those who live in parts of the world where economic conditions have not yet made patriarchy antiquated, and there are others who cling to it out of tradition. But moral evolution is occurring in their lives as well.

The conditions causing this evolution can be classified as political, economic, social, and technoscientific. These can be summarized by the acronym PEST.<sup>9</sup> The PEST conditions are the result of complex interactions beyond most individuals' ability to control. When the PEST situation changes, we adapt to the new realities they create in order to thrive. Our moral life must adapt just as surely as other parts of culture do. Thus we should understand morality as contextual.

Culture carries forward moral understandings that individuals absorb without necessarily being conscious of it. Every culture has its own norms, values, obligations, rights, responsibilities, ideals and customs. This moral cluster is what Alasdair MacIntyre calls a "moral thicket." He describes it that way because of the tangle these moral elements create. Most of the time we can navigate our culture's moral thicket without thought because of our capacity to repeat unselfconsciously behaviors that are effective and socially acceptable.

However, the elements of the moral thicket do not interact neatly and pre-

dictably but rather in complex ways. These interactions are shaped by culture, shifting circumstances and presenting issues. Our moral life takes place within that complexity. The task of ethics is to help us navigate in a manner appropriate to each new set of circumstances we face.

### Reaffirming Universal Positions

Despite the fact that morality is culturally conditioned, there are some statements about human moral life that rise above context. While we might debate what they are, one that is very broadly held is, “You shall not murder.” Moral relativists would say this is not an absolute rule, but most people would disagree, as would philosophers from Socrates to Rawls. We might disagree somewhat about how to define “murder,” but we would agree about most cases. There is strong intersubjective agreement here, if not objectivity!

Loyalty to family is another universal, perhaps because it confers an evolutionary advantage. Morality generally furthers the interests of our species. Of course the existence of moral precepts does not guarantee individual compliance. The fact that we can find only a small number of universal precepts, and that even these are understood slightly differently in different cultures, underlines the degree to which many of our moral decisions can only be understood in context. Even how we understand murder differs, as the actions of contemporary terrorists demonstrate. Moral argument against terrorism rests

in part on definitions of terms, in part on authority claims and in part on historical analysis. Too complex to explore here, it hinges in part on what constitutes an acceptable level of collateral damage in a just war — and what constitutes a just war. A rich literature explores that issue.<sup>10</sup>

As discussed above, the adaptation of Jewish ethics to changing circumstances occurred naturally through *halakha* and *minhag* in the organic Jewish communities of earlier generations. While rabbis were often the decisors during this period, the needs and concerns of the community members and their willingness to accept some leaders’ decisions and reject others created a dynamic tension that permitted such evolution. In our time, with the organic community a distant memory, the challenge is to create communities with the power to shape substantially the moral life of the community and its members. This can only happen through voluntary consent that grows out of moral dialogue. Creating the kind of dialogue that can alter the commitments of community members and create broadly shared agreement — or at least influence — is particularly critical in voluntary communities, where there is a minimal ability to enforce compliance.

### Problems of Adapting Culture

One of the marks of a strong culture is its capacity to acculturate children and other new members to its way of doing things. Among the tools for doing that are language, practices that can be duplicated, customs, rituals, and

other forces of socialization. One of the problems with living in a rapidly changing world is that groups have a hard time adapting their cultures to the changes. People who need to adjust the elements of morality to these changes often have difficulty in keeping up. Practices that embody ways of doing things effectively and that train others to do them are embodied in professions, customs, manners and a broad variety of other behaviors. All these practices contain a moral component. Change disrupts these practices.<sup>11</sup> When that occurs, the social settings that carry moral life weaken, and morality becomes thinner. More people act immorally, both intentionally and inadvertently, when the social mechanisms that reinforce moral life are weaker.

Whereas in earlier times, each person lived primarily in a single culture, today people in industrialized nations have multiple cultural identities. One person might be an American, a Jew, a lawyer and a mother. With each of these identities come different values and practices. That is particularly challenging for people interested in passing on a way of life like Jewish culture, which is a secondary culture<sup>12</sup> for all but a tiny minority of Jews. This makes it very difficult to pass on Jewish ethics because Jewish culture has become so thin in most places, including much of Israel.

Most Jews are not employed in the Jewish community. Their primary language is not Hebrew. They do not dress in a distinctively Jewish way. Their primary forms of entertainment — tele-

vision, movies, books, magazines, games, sports — are not Jewish. Their Jewish acculturation is therefore highly limited. When culture becomes thin, it is enormously challenging to pass on ethical frameworks because our practices and customs — our ways of doing things — embody and reinforce our ethics.

### How Pass on Jewish Ethics?

What can we do to increase our capacity to pass on Jewish ethics? We can strengthen culture by creating vigorous communities. We can attempt to create shared moral vocabulary in our communities. We can foster strong relationships among people in our communities. We can reinforce ritual behaviors whose values our communities support, and we can advocate for the ethical outlook they embody. We can provide feedback to each other (*tokheha* — see Lev. 19:17) when we believe that a person or organization is engaged in practices are not in keeping with our shared values. We can also provide feedback when we believe someone is doing something that is in moral error. The moral dialogue that results will provide an opportunity for examining definitions and traditions, reinforcing vocabulary and norms, and expanding moral vigor. When leaders fail to speak directly and frequently to these issues, the result is an increasing incursion of values and norms from the primary culture.

Creating intensive group experiences is a powerful tool for imprinting culture. One of the reasons that Jewish

summer camps are so important in Jewish identity formation is that they create a community context for full-immersion Jewish living. Strong relationships and powerful experiences occur naturally. In that context, values, vocabulary and shared practice are mastered with little conscious effort, a situation not easily achieved even in day schools, because they are not 24-hour environments. Of course, each camp inculcates values and practices reflective of its own ideology. Jewish moral life is primarily rooted in particular Jewish communities, not the diverse global Jewish community.

### Values-based Decision Making

Congregation-based communities can only have substantial influence on the moral lives of their members if they develop a shared ethos and intensive relationships. Values-based decision making (VBDM) is designed to create a moral dialogue that reinforces values, creates consensus, and builds community.<sup>13</sup> VBDM is a multi-step process that requires fact-finding, exploration of Jewish tradition, determination of actions excluded by norms, and discovery of relevant values and ideals. Consideration of alternative courses of action can then take place in light of consequences, values, and ideals. This process is one of self-education and not just decision making. It can work both for individuals and for groups when they are facing decisions with sufficiently important impact and a substantial moral component.

Over the last 15 years, VBDM has

become common in Reconstructionist congregations. The need for moral discussion and a community consensus around ethical practice provides a powerful rationale for VBDM. It is designed to help raise consciousness about vocabulary, and to help establish communal norms and practices that add depth and meaning to Jewish culture. By empowering people to engage in this process as a community, we also help them to discover the means to carry their set Jewish values and norms into application in their own lives.

### Jewish Decision Making

Of course, if the study stage of VBDM is not done with care, people will simply bring with them their American individualist perspectives, patiently wait until the study step of VBDM is over, and assert their American values. That can derail the educational phase and empty the process of its Jewish content. When that occurs, the purpose of VBDM is circumvented. VBDM only works as effective Jewish guidance if there is genuine and substantial engagement with Jewish culture — texts, traditions and values. Otherwise VBDM may still result in effective decision making — it's just not Jewish. A Jewish community committed to Jewish culture ought to be true to its identity.

This is not to say that Jewish values are unchanging — Reconstructionists in recent decades have expanded Jewish tradition to include values like democracy and inclusion.<sup>14</sup> Cultures evolve. But values held by individual

Jews are not necessarily Jewish values; that is an issue with which each Jewish community must wrestle. When a claimed value is in tension with inherited beliefs, practices or norms, careful Jewish study and exploration of the issues are warranted.

The decision to make a significant change should be accompanied by soul-searching and trepidation, with careful thought about implications for social justice and the future of the Jewish people. The response to “giving Jewish tradition a vote” ought not to be “it doesn’t speak to me.” Tradition votes only when we listen carefully. Only listening and agonizing can validate a veto. Some communities may not start by examining Jewish tradition. This invalidates their decision-making process. However, if a community avoids engaging Jewish tradition, that flaw would carry over to other decision-making processes, unless it turns over decisions to a rabbi who takes Judaism seriously, or to another leader with similar knowledge and commitment. This would involve the betrayal of other values.

### **Controlling Group Dynamics**

Another objection some have raised to VBDM is that as a method of group governance, it is subject to the politics of groups. Decisions are affected by how effectively people argue, by the dynamics of bullying and by personal pleading. But shared decision making is always subject to group dynamics. A fair-minded chairperson makes a critical difference in assuring that all voices

are heard. In a synagogue setting the rabbi, too, can act as a guarantor of a well-crafted process.

At least as important as what the rabbi and chairperson do on the spot are the norms established in the group for meticulously following the stages of the VBDM process, for assuring that every voice is encouraged, and for taking Jewish approaches seriously. The critics of VBDM are correct that it does not work well if it is not done with care. However, the same is true of all group processes. It is important that VBDM is defined at every stage as an educational process, not just one for decision making.

As with all processes, if it goes astray or if the results are shown to be inadequate, the community has the right, and indeed the obligation, to start a new process. If each process includes substantial education, the individuals involved will be enriched, and the community will be strengthened. The first and most important task of the chairperson and rabbi is to guarantee a sufficient educational process. This involves text and context, the place of practice in the community and exploration of all the aspects of the moral thicket. The infusion of Jewish values vocabulary and a sense of Jewish history strengthen Jewish culture and moral life.

### **Competing Forces**

One of the challenges of creating Jewish moral influence in the contemporary North American setting is the enormous power of marketing. Mar-

keting is designed to appeal to our needs and wants in order to persuade us to spend money to purchase goods and services. Marketing necessarily leads to an emphasis on extrinsic goods — products and services that can be bought and sold. The consequence in America has been a reduction of awareness of the importance of intrinsic goods. Intrinsic goods are such things as personal moral virtue, the satisfaction that comes from performance of deeds of altruism and the meaning that flows from efforts made to sustain long-term relationships.

One of the tensions between American and Jewish culture is the growing emphasis on extrinsic goods in contemporary American culture. Jewish culture appreciates extrinsic goods while simultaneously emphasizing the importance of intrinsic ones. Part of what VBDM ought to accomplish is to help people become much more fully aware of the importance of the kinds of intrinsic goods that Judaism emphasizes.

Examples abound: the attitude of gratitude that is central in Jewish prayer, the virtue of humility, the value of community connection, and the obligation to be engaged with Torah are but a few. Only when people are conscious of the way in which they have been manipulated by marketing can they consider the alternative. Jewish moral dialogue can help to build that awareness.

(Of course, it is true that VBDM utilized by Southern Baptists in Mississippi or Buddhists in Dharmasala will reach very different conclusions than Reconstructionist Jews' conclusions

because each group starts with very different inputs — different norms, definitions, values and beliefs.)

VBDM can also provide the basis for a dialogue. On some issues a consensus can emerge. On others, such as the differences between Jews and Catholics about abortion, the nature of the conflict can be clarified. VBDM works first to clarify moral thought. Once the issues are clear, we can then struggle to discern what we ought to believe and do. Becoming conscious about these moral matters helps to increase our resistance to manipulation.

### Therapy and Happiness

A second major part of American culture that has challenged the Jewish moral outlook in recent years has been the emphasis on psychotherapy. Of course, interventions in order to deal with mental illness and to help people recover from trauma are important, and it is wonderful that we have advanced both in our use of pharmaceutical interventions and in our capacity to provide individual and group therapy. Achieving greater personal insight is also a worthwhile goal. For many reasons, including shifts in insurance reimbursements and the rapidly growing array of psychotropic medicals available, drug therapy is a much more common intervention today.

Judaism places a high value on healing, and that includes mental health. However, there are several aspects of some forms of therapy that are not so salutary from a Jewish perspective. One

of these stems from the fact that the various forms of therapy all have values of their own. Often people are unaware that they are absorbing values from therapeutic culture.<sup>15</sup> One value is the paramount importance of individual happiness, a central idea in some approaches to therapy found in the U.S. While not all therapists or all therapies have this in common, enough do so that they reinforce the emphasis on individuals seeking happiness that stems also from capitalism and marketing.<sup>16</sup>

This by itself is not necessarily a bad thing; Aristotle, for example, placed a high value on happiness. But emphasizing personal happiness reinforces American individualism in ways that can lead to isolation, loneliness and insecurity. Of course, not all therapeutic methods take this approach; Mary Pipher, for example, eschews it.<sup>17</sup> Therapy is a wonderful tool — and Jews who utilize it should be conscious of its limits.

### Invigorating Jewish Moral Life

VBDM is not a panacea. It can fully invigorate the moral life of a Jewish community only when it includes a substantial educational process, when the leaders of the community create currency for Jewish moral terminology, and the study of Jewish texts and maintenance of Jewish traditions are ongoing parts of the life of the community.

The central importance of community in a Jewish ethical system suggests that we ought to make major personal investments in the creation and main-

tenance of community. Without community there will be no vehicle to preserve and convey Jewish culture. Because of the cultural setting in which we live, democratic, inclusive community is the model that makes the most sense. While developing the technologies to create and reinforce such community is a challenging and ongoing task, the rewards of community involvement have intrinsic benefits that more than justify that challenge.

---

1. *Anokhi*, translated as “I,” is the first word of the Ten Commandments. Its first letter is *aleph*, which is a silent letter.

2. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Harvard University Press, 1971).

3. The huge literature that explores these issues includes, for example, Janet Radcliffe Richards, *Human Nature after Darwin: A Philosophical Introduction* (The Open University, 2000) and Robert Wright, *The Moral Animal*, as well as works by V.S. Ramachandian, Francis Fukuyama, Robert Pollack, David S. Wilson, and many others.

4. See, for example, Paul Maclean, “A Mind of Three Minds: Educating the Triune Brain,” *Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education*, 1978, 308-341; *The Triune Brain in Evolution: Role in Paleocerebral Functions* (Plenum 1990); *The Evolutionary Neuroethology of Paul MacLean* (Praeger, 2002).

5. Lawrence Kohlberg, *The Philosophy of Moral Development* (Harper and Row, 1981).

6. A significant amount of this research is summarized in Augusto Blasi, “Bridging Moral Cognition and Moral Action: A Critical Review of the Literature,” *Psychological Bulletin*, 88.1, July 1980, 1-45.

7. This is made yet more complex by problem of typology, as Kohlberg studied Western males. A gendered critique is offered by Carol Gilligan's *In a Different Voice*. Cultural and class issues exist as well. For the purpose of this article, however, it is enough to recognize that in all individuals a large gap exists between moral reasoning and moral action.

8. Human beings exist as we know them only in the context of culture, which allowed their evolution into creatures with long childhoods, a dependence on language, and the capability to utilize tools. This critical understanding is central to cultural anthropology. See Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Culture* (Basic Books, 1973).

9. I first encountered this idea through the teaching of Hasan Ozbekhan, then a professor at the Wharton School.

10. See, for example, Michael Walzer's *Just and Unjust Wars* (Basic Books, 1992) and works by Paul Ramsey, James Childress, Douglas Lackey, S. Hauerwas, and J.B. Elshtain.

11. Alasdair MacIntyre discusses this issue in *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, 1984), and

Jeffrey Stout responds more optimistically in *Ethics after Babel* (Beacon, 1988).

12. Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann were the first in my experience to use the term "secondary culture." See *The Social Construction of Reality* (Anchor, 1966). Mordecai Kaplan talks about "primary" and "secondary" civilizations in *Judaism as a Civilization* (Macmillan, 1934).

13. For a fuller methodological discussion of values-based decision making, see my article by that name in *The Reconstructionist* 65.2, Spring 2001; reprinted in the second edition of volume one of *The Guide to Jewish Practice* (RRC Press, 2000).

14. See David Teutsch, "Attitudes, Values and Beliefs", *Guide to Jewish Practice* (RRC Press, 2000), pp. 15-25.

15. See Don Browning, *Religious Thought and Modern Psychologies: A Critical Conversation in the Theology of Culture* for an analysis of the diverse ideologies embedded in various therapies.

16. Robert Bellah explores this theme at length in *Habits of the Heart*.

17. See Mary Pipher's *Reviving Ophelia* and *The Sheltering of Each Other*.