

## Ethics Talk before Temple B'nai Israel, Dec. 14, 2001

In the daytime, I teach classes on noetic medicine, or the power of thought to heal. But tonight I will be talking about ethics, which, along with monotheism, are the cornerstones of our faith. In doing so, I will be combining two ideas from Jewish mysticism, the idea of *tikkun olam*, literally translated as “repairing the world” and *kavanah*, which means “intention” or “purpose.”

However, I speak the language of Jewish mysticism better than Hebrew. I’m told the correct Hebrew phrase for the subject of this talk, “with the intent of making a better world,” is *l’ma-an tikkun olam*.

Our Torah tells us that we humans have the capacity to distinguish good from evil. Although we are told that we usurped this power, we are nonetheless commanded to exercise it as best we can. For the last hundred years, it has almost become cliché to say that our technology has outpaced our ethics. In response, some call for a return to moral authoritarianism, the ethic of doing what you are told, but this option is no longer viable. In the last century, and even in the last few months, we have witnessed the horrific consequences of the authoritarian ethic. Moreover, in a free society, it is simply not enforceable. Some of us were born Jews; others have converted. But in America today all Jews are Jews by choice. No moral authority, or set of rules, reigns absolute — even among us Jews.

What I would like to suggest tonight is that our ethical development has been hindered by two basic misconceptions. The first is that ethics and self-centeredness are incompatible, that morality means acting as if another were the center of your life. From this, some argue that genuine altruism does not exist. The other misconception is that ethics itself is just a matter of applying rules.

To illustrate my point, I’m going to ask you to take just a moment to exercise your imagination. Close your eyes, and imagine you’re a fly on the wall, and getting smaller and smaller.... until you are a tiny, invisible speck, a mathematical point, if you will.... Now imagine the wall, the room, and the whole world slowly dissolving away, until there is nothing left but the speck you call yourself in infinite blackness. (Don’t worry, I’m not going to leave you there!)... Then you re-discover your imagination. You can reinvent the Universe in any way you like.... Take a few seconds to picture this ideal world.... What is it like?... How are the people in it behaving?... When you have a general idea of what this imaginary, ideal world is like, open your eyes and return to the room.... Well, all good things must come to an end, and this is no exception. It’s time to move on.

How many of you imagined a world with disease? Poverty? War? Oppression, in any form? Anyone envision any concentration camps? What most of you envisioned was a world that was healthy, prosperous, peaceful, happy, and environmentally clean, a nice place to live. But you’ve done something more. In imagination, you were expressing your desire to create the best possible world. This desire to bring about a better world is in all of us, and it never really dies. For all our self-centeredness, nobody really wants anyone to suffer undeservedly and unnecessarily. We might want this or that person to suffer (You know, the one who *really* deserves it, like Osama bin Laden or your ex!), but these are people that pose a threat to our well-being or who we believe have caused misery for us or someone we care about. Some people need scapegoats to explain their problems. The Nazis would never have tried to exterminate us had they not blamed

us for Germany's downfall in World War I. However, were there no problems, there would be no scapegoats. Remove them, and none of us really want to hurt each other. In fact, we really want to help out. This intent to create a better world is what I mean by *l'ma-an tikkun olam*. You could also call it *altruism*, which some say doesn't exist.

So altruism, or *l'ma-an tikkun olam*, does exist, along with, and even as part of, our self-centeredness. We must stop demanding that people be less self-centered. We are self-centered by nature. We have no choice in the matter. But that does not mean we are basically evil, as some have argued. As you yourself have just experienced, all of us have a genuine, continuing desire to do good. We do, however, have the choice of whether to act according to *l'ma-an tikkun olam*, or the dictates of motives less noble. Our Bible teaches us that we are on the one hand "worms of the dust" and "created in the image and likeness of G-d" on the other. The question is, Which self is the real self? I cannot speak for everyone, but I would vote for the Divine Image, because it abides regardless of circumstances. The worm of the dust would cease to exist were we not threatened with loss or had never been hurt. So I take my position in a long line of philosophers, which includes Socrates and Confucius, that believe human nature is basically good. (There now, have I taken care of your self-esteem problems? You can send me a check next week, or as soon as *Shabbat* is over.)

You may wonder where the commandments of Torah fit in all this. The reason we have ethical rules is that we are neither all powerful nor all knowing. Ethical rules serve as general maxims that keep us in alignment with *l'ma-an tikkun olam* most of the time. Accordingly, Conservative Judaism teaches us to be open-minded with respect to the authority behind our rules, yet still appreciative of a 5000-year-old tradition's wisdom. It also teaches us that rules alone are not enough. First, no set of rules can ever be complete. Should we attempt to create one, the result would be a system so complex that it would cease to be intelligible — like our income tax code. Secondly, no set of rules by itself is self-enforcing. Divine reward and retribution are often cited as ethical motives, but then ethics becomes nothing more than an exercise in manipulating the system for personal gain. Morality requires a genuine, authentic desire for a better world, *l'ma-an tikkun olam*, or it doesn't exist.

Legalistic systems, like authoritarian ones, appeal to the intellectual in us, the part of us that is more comfortable making logical judgments of truth or falsity than moral decisions of right and wrong. Instead of asking whether something creates a better world, we ask if Section 24(A)(i) applies. But, as the Scottish philosopher David Hume said, you can't get an "ought" from an "is." Moral distinctions are more like aesthetic ones, such as distinguishing a sweet from a foul smell. A few years ago, I picked up a business magazine on an airplane, in which the cover story was titled: "Bill Gates's Plans for Netscape (It Ain't Pretty)." My point here is not to debate the merits of the Justice Department's recent suit against Microsoft, but to show that we can all understand what the author meant by "ain't pretty." Dishonesty, violence, cruelty, and oppression, when viewed from a neutral perspective, are *profoundly ugly*. Unless you're insane or brainwashed, you don't want them in your world.

Perhaps the best example of what I am talking about is in running a business. Run in the spirit of *l'ma-an tikkun olam*, a business can become a marvelous, even beautiful instrument for good. It provides a return on investment for its owners, a place to contribute and earn a living for its employees, quality goods and services for its customers, and an opportunity for its leadership to

prosper and contribute in a big way. Run for a lesser purpose, it can become a rapacious monster that devours everything in its path and lays waste the land. As the author of the above-mentioned article said, "It ain't pretty." Healthy businesses, like healthy human beings, seek to function in the world as organs, not malignant tumors.

Another place is in the bewildering task of educating our children for a world that will be very different from our own. Our challenge is to cultivate in them the creativity and ingenuity to solve yet-unknown problems and to instill in them the Jewish values that will inspire them to work for a better world. I know this firsthand from my involvement in the Jewish Day Schools for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century program at Morasha Jewish Day School, where my daughter Ariella is in the first grade. All of us involved, parents, teachers, staff, and lay leaders are all working together to redefine Jewish education to build on the school's excellence in general education and to fashion a Jewish community that is a moral and intellectual beacon to the world.

I wish I could say that this kind of ethic is easier or even simpler, but I cannot. Because we have rejected both authoritarianism and legalism, we must call the tough shots ourselves. We cannot, for example, adopt the a priori rule of pacifism and refrain from all violence. There are times when *l'ma-an tikkun olam* itself may dictate that we engage in these activities, such as in stopping the kind of atrocities committed on Sept. 11. But we should do so only when we firmly believe our actions will lead to a better world. And we must always be mindful of the difference between fighting for a better world and protecting our individual or collective egos.

The ethics of the new millenium cannot rely on blind reverence for authority, nor an increasingly complex set of rules. Instead it depends on our ability to recognize, cultivate, and act on the motive of *l'ma-an tikkun olam*. This must become the principle that guides us in all our activities, our work, our play, and our interpersonal relationships. This is the challenge our Torah has put before us as 21<sup>st</sup> century Jews.

A few minutes ago, I asked you to dream a little. Now I would like to share with you a longstanding dream of my own. I dream that someday the Jewish people will have earned a reputation for integrity in business that matches our stereotype for shrewdness, when people among the nations say, "If you really want someone who says what he means, means what he says, delivers what he promises, and is aware of the consequences of his actions, then find yourself a Jew." Personally, I don't believe our people will be impoverished by pursuing this dream. Moreover, the seeds of antisemitism, like those of a weed on a well-kept lawn, will find it much harder to germinate, take root, and grow. But most importantly, it will mean that we as a people have ourselves chosen to take on the mission for which we were chosen.

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