DATA of Plano

Parshas Shoftim | 6 Elul, 5781 | August 14, 2021

Earliest candle lighting: **6:50**

Mincha: **7:00**

Candle lighting : **7:56**

Shacharis: **9:00**

Latest time for Shema: **10:10**

Kiddush: **11:35**

Mincha: **7:35**

Maariv / Shabbos ends: **8:59**

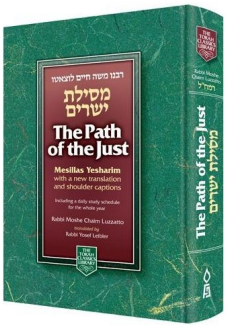
Mincha/Maariv during the week: **7:55**

Darwin and the Mussar Movement

By Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb

Ethics is a subject about which we all have many questions. What makes an ethical personality? How do we make ethical decisions in complicated circumstances?

Personally, there are two specific questions that have always been of concern to me. One is, "How does one get started upon the process of becoming a more ethical person?" This question is especially relevant at this time of year when many of us begin to think about the upcoming High Holidays and the requirement that we embark upon a process of introspection, of repentance, of *teshuvah*.



There is a second type of question that I pose to myself: "Where do we look to for guidance in ethical matters?" Are we restricted only to sacred sources? Or do secular sources also hold wisdom with regard to ethical behavior and to self-improvement in the ethical sphere?

In my personal reflections on the subject of universal ethics, I have long been guided by a passage in the writings of Rabbi Abraham Isaac HaCohen Kook, the first chief Rabbi of the land of Israel. He speaks of two sources for ethical guidance. The first is *yir'at shamayim*, fear of heaven, which is a religious source. The second is *hamussar hativ'i*, natural ethics, by which he means the knowledge of right and wrong, which is available to all mankind, no matter what their religion is, if any. Rav Kook asserts that these two sources go hand-in-hand and must be consistent with one another.

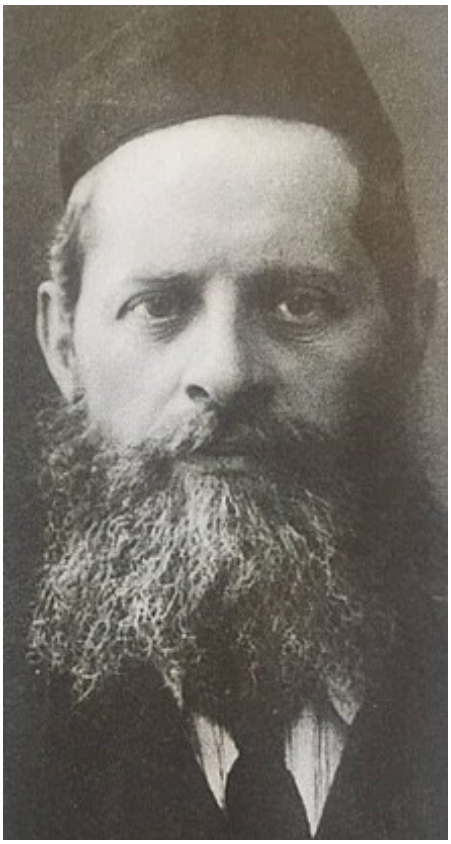
More recently, I have been reading a book by the psychiatrist Maurice Levine, entitled *Psychiatry and Ethics*. Levine begins the first chapter his work with a quotation from Charles Darwin's autobiography:

"I had... followed a golden rule, namely that whenever a published fact, a new observation or thought came across me, which was opposed to my general results, to make a memorandum of it without fail and at once; for I had found by experience that such facts and thoughts were far more apt to escape from the memory than favorable areas. Owing to this habit, very few objections were raised against my views, which I had not at least noticed and attempted to answer."

Levine uses this interesting habit of the father of the theory of evolution to illustrate what he considers to

be a fundamental process in the development a truly ethical person. He calls this the process of "self-scrutiny". He writes, "A good part of a man's ethics consists of the ways in which he copes with his temptations." Darwin was aware of his own temptation to only recognize evidence that supported his theories and to conveniently ignore or forget facts that would undermine them. And he acted to control that temptation.

Darwin was certainly not unique in this weakness, although the manner in which he dealt with it was exemplary. We all have ideas about our projects, or about ourselves, and we all tend to pay careful attention to everything that would confirm our opinions. And we all excel at ignoring, suppressing, forgetting, or discounting all information that might force us to reevaluate our theories or, heaven forbid, re-examine our opinions about ourselves.



As Levine puts it, one of the fundamentals of sound ethical character is "the need to know oneself, the need to be as honest with oneself as possible, the need to avoid self-kidding."

This week's Torah portion, *Parshat Shoftim*, we encounter a *mitzvah* which seems to be given only to judges: "You shall not judge unfairly... you shall not take bribes, for bribes blind the eyes of the discerning and upset the plea of the just." (*Deuteronomy* 16:19)

In the mid-19th century, a rabbi named Israel Salanter began a movement designed to educate people about the importance of ethics in the Jewish tradition. That movement was known as the "Mussar Movement," "*mussar*" being the Hebrew word for ethics. This movement had many leaders over the generations and continues to have a significant contemporary influence.

One of the greatest representatives of the Mussar Movement was a man named Rabbi Abraham Grodzinski, who was murdered by the Nazis in the ghetto of Kovno during the Holocaust.

Rabbi Grodzinski had a problem with the text of the above verse in this week's Torah portion. He wondered what those of us who are not judges can learn from the injunction against taking bribes. What lesson is there for every man in the observation that "bribery blinds the eyes of the discerning?"

The martyred Rabbi had an answer that is strikingly similar to the observation about ethics that Dr. Levine was able to learn from Darwin's autobiographical note. "We all have personal interests," writes Rabbi Grodzinski, "personal inclinations that result in misperceptions, misjudgments, and tragic moral errors. These personal prejudices are the equivalent of bribery. Our own self-interest often blinds us and distorts our judgment as to what is right and what is wrong."

The great ethical teachers in our tradition consistently point out that in a sense, we are all "judges," and we are constantly acting as judges in all of the decisions that we make throughout even the most mundane day. And we are always subject to "bribes;" that is, to the temptations to ignore information that is uncomfortable to us, that threatens our pre-existing assumptions, or that forces us to re-examine the question of whom we really are.

Charles Darwin and Rabbi Israel Salanter, who were almost exact contemporaries of each other, had very different worldviews. Had they had the opportunity, they would have debated fiercely about the origins of the universe and of the nature of humanity. But on this one point, they would have thoroughly agreed: we are all subject to the temptation of distorting reality to fit our own selfish interests. And we all need to be vigilant against such temptation.

This brief excursion into the posthumously published writings of a saintly Holocaust victim, *Torat Avraham Grodzinski*, and the collection of a Jewish American psychiatrist's lectures, *Psychiatry and Ethics*, helped me answer both of my questions.

Firstly, are we restricted only to sacred writings in our search for ethical guidance? No, we can even find such guidance in the autobiography of a man whose writings were considered to be the greatest threat to traditional religion.

And secondly, what is the first step for those of us who wish to initiate a process of *teshuvah*, of ethical self-improvement. It may very well be what our ancient scholars referred to as "*cheshbon hanefesh*," and what a contemporary thinker has aptly termed "self-scrutiny."

Check out our website at www.dataofplano.org for:

- Registration for all upcoming programs
- Payment portal (pledges, donation, membership, tuition)
- An interactive map of the Plano eruv
- Links to Jewish and kosher institutions in the Dallas area
- The weekly newsletter and an archive of previous issues
- Community calendar of events
- "DATA Bytes" Blog
- Halachik times for Plano available at your fingertips
- Audio gallery with "Sounds of DATA of Plano"
- Sunday school information and registration
- And more...

Mazel tov to Deedee and Eden Markowitz on the birth of a baby boy.

All are invited to the Markowitz home (3217 Teakwood) for a "Shalom Zachor" on Friday evening after 9:45.

The bris will be held this Shabbos at the conclusion of davening.

A special kiddush is sponsored by the Markowitz family in honor of the occasion. There will be rolls to wash for those who wish.

Which verse in this week's Torah portion contains the numbers 1,2 and 3?

Dedication Opportunities

Weekly Kiddush

A perfect way to celebrate or mark an occasion with the community. Then entire shul joins together on Shabbat morning after services for delicious Shabbat cholent, treats and socializing. Kiddush sponsorship is recognized in the newsletter each week.

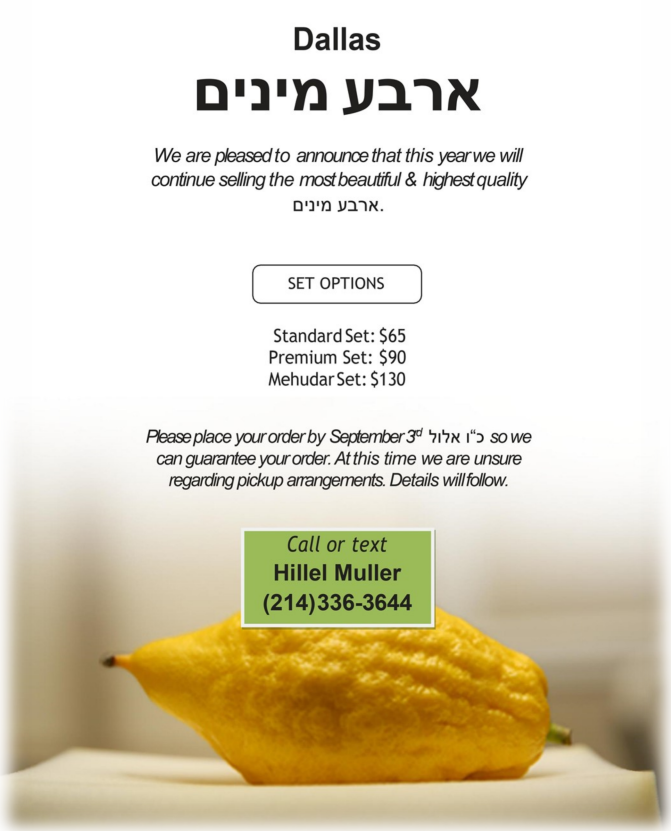
(Please note the new sponsorship rate.)

$250

Week of Learning and Prayer

There is no greater merit for someone you wish to honor or for a departed loved one than enabling the study of Torah and Tefilah. With this sponsorship, all of the Torah learning and prayers taking place at DATA of Plano throughout the week will be in the merit of whomever you choose. Notification will be posted in the shul throughout the week.

$360



Registration for the High Holidays is now open!

Join DATA of Plano's welcoming and unique services for:

- Lively Traditional service infused with uplifting song
- Entertaining Learners' Service with Rabbi Yogi (indoor and outdoor options)
- All-new teen program with NCSY
- Spirited and educational youth programming with Rabbi Nissel and Mrs. Sonnenblick
- Unmatched pricing ($36 for first-time families for the entire High Holidays)

Register online at www.dataofplano.org

Welcome to **Rabbi Shragi and Laya Senft** and family to the community.

The Senfts join us from Pittsburgh. They will be teaching in Torah Day School of Dallas.