

IMPRIMIS

Because Ideas Have Consequences

950,000 Readers

Ethics, One Day at a Time

Rabbi Joseph Telushkin

Synagogue for the Performing Arts



RABBI JOSEPH TELUSHKIN, named one of the 50 best speakers in the United States by *Talk Magazine*, is also the author or co-author of seven influential books about the history, beliefs, ethics, culture, and religious practices of Judaism. *Biblical Literacy: The Most Important People, Events and Ideas of the Hebrew Bible* was chosen as a Book-of-the-Month Club selection. *Words that Hurt, Words that Heal*, profiled in the January 1996 edition of *Imprimis*, inspired two U.S. Senators to call for a "National Speak No Evil Day." His novel, *An Eye for an Eye*, became the basis of four episodes of the Emmy Award-winning ABC TV series, *The Practice*, and he has co-written three additional episodes of the program. He also has written an episode of *Touched by an Angel* that is scheduled to air this month. Rabbi Telushkin was the co-author and associate producer of the 1991 film, *The Quarrel*, an American Playhouse production named the winner of the Santa Barbara Film Festival.

Rabbi Telushkin was ordained at Yeshiva University in New York and pursued graduate studies in Jewish history at Columbia University. He lectures throughout the United States and serves as an associate of the National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership and as spiritual leader of the Synagogue for the Performing Arts.

The following remarks are based on a lecture given by Rabbi Telushkin at Hillsdale College's Center for Constructive Alternatives seminar, "Athens, Rome, and Jerusalem: The Western Legacy from the Ancient World," on November 15, 1999. Rabbi Telushkin based his address on his latest book, The Book of Jewish Values: A Day-by-Day Guide to Ethical Living, being released this month by Bell Tower.

When historians look back at the United States in the twentieth century, they probably will view the century as having been dominated by macro events, events that affected large numbers of people and that required the responses of equally large numbers. Their focus likely will be on occurrences such as World War I, the Great Depression of the 1930s, World War II and the resulting mobilization of millions of soldiers and an entire economy to defeat the Nazi peril, and the decades-long

Cold War that ended only with the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union. And, of course, there were macro transformations and battles within our society, most notably, the civil rights movement, which began with demands for an end to segregation and ultimately led to an extraordinary increase in participation by people of color in all aspects of American life. In turn, that movement helped lay the groundwork for the enormously increased participation by women in all facets of American society.

I believe, however, that the 21st century likely will be dominated more by micro issues than macro ones. If the 20th century was largely devoted to answering the question, "How can we survive?" (for without a winning strategy, Nazism and Communism would have overwhelmed us), the coming years will be devoted to answering the question, "What makes our survival worthwhile?"

I would like to suggest that what we most need now is to articulate a vision for the future, one that can be lived out one day at a time.

Central to this vision is the need for each of us to develop what I like to call "moral imagination." By this, I mean the ability fully to think through the implications of our actions, particularly as to how they will affect others. Over the past century, society has made extraordinary technological advances because of the active imaginations of our scientists and researchers, but we have been slower to advance morally because of a general unwillingness to practice imagination in the moral sphere. So let me start now by offering two examples: one, of the harm that can ensue when we refuse to exercise moral imagination; the other, of the great good that can come about when we do employ it.

The first involves the late Lee Atwater, the brilliant but highly aggressive campaign manager who directed George Bush's successful 1988 presidential bid. In 1980 Atwater was managing a congressional election campaign in South Carolina, during which his campaign released information that the Democratic candidate in the race, Tom Turnispeed, had years earlier suffered an episode of depression for which he had received electric shock treatment.

Turnispeed was mortified and outraged. None of us appreciates having his or her medical history made public, and particularly not our psychiatric history. He responded with an anguished attack on his opponent's campaign ethics. When Atwater was asked to respond to Turnispeed's attack, he answered that he had no intention of responding to charges made by a person "hooked up to a jumper cable."

What a grotesque violation of privacy and what a shameful humiliation of another! Atwater's cruel words put into the voters' heads a vicious, graphic image that potentially poisoned not only their perceptions of Turnispeed, but also of everyone else who had undergone electric shock therapy.

This story, however, has a postscript. Ten years later Atwater was in a hospital bed dying of an inoperable brain tumor. In the last weeks of his life, while he was lying in a room connected to all

sorts of uncomfortable and invasive machines, he wrote a letter to Turnispeed begging his forgiveness. I am convinced this was no phony deathbed repentance. Finding himself in this horrible circumstance, Atwater finally realized the enormous cruelty he had committed and fully regretted it.

Had Atwater had the moral imagination to realize in 1980 what he realized in 1990, he never would have released information about Turnispeed's treatment or mocked his experience. Indeed, moral imagination involves "repenting" of evil acts before we commit them, by wielding our imagination in such a manner that we act rightly towards others even when we don't have the experience or knowledge to be fully empathetic.

Consider the case of Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Auerbach, a leading rabbinic scholar in Jerusalem who was known as much for his warm heart as for his powerful intellect. One day, the concerned parents of a retarded boy asked him to consult on the choice of an institution for their son. They were considering two alternative facilities, each having certain advantages. The rabbi listened carefully to their description and then asked, "Where is the boy? What does he say about all this?"

The parents looked at each other, abashed. Clearly, it had never entered their minds to discuss the matter with their son. Outraged, the rabbi cried out, "You are committing a sin against the soul of this child! You intend to evict him from his home and consign him to a strange place with a regimented atmosphere. He must be encouraged and not be allowed to feel that he is being betrayed."

Rabbi Auerbach instructed the parents to bring the boy to him. They hurriedly went home and soon returned with the child. "What is your name?" the rabbi asked him.

"Akiva," he replied.

"How do you do, Akiva?" he asked. Then Rabbi Auerbach, who was known for his exceptional humility, said something very unexpected. "My name is Shlomo Zalman Auerbach. I am the greatest Torah authority of this generation, and everyone listens to me. You are going to enter a special



school now, and I would like you to represent me and look after all of the religious matters in your new home." As the boy's eyes remained riveted on the rabbi's face, he said, "I shall now give you rabbinical ordination. This will make you a rabbi, and I want you to use this honor wisely."

This story is an example of moral imagination par excellence. Had the boy been sent away in the manner his parents were planning, he would have felt rejected and betrayed. Instead, because of Rabbi Auerbach's ability to understand what the boy most needed, he went to his new home with a sense of pride and purpose. How could he not have such a sense? After all, he was the representative of the greatest rabbi of his age.

I would like to lay out for your consideration seven days of moral imagination, a week-long curriculum of good deeds that can transform and elevate your life and the lives of all those around you, one day at a time.

Day 1 - Sunday

Raising Your Children to Love Both Themselves and Others

MANY PARENTS reserve their highest praise for their children's intellectual and athletic accomplishments. Thus, for example, they compliment the child most effusively when he achieves intellectual distinction ("I'm particularly proud of how smart you are") and, when speaking to others, it is this aspect of their child that they praise ("Scott's so intelligent; it's just amazing").

What sort of self-image does a child develop who is not intellectually or athletically gifted, whose parents cannot go around bragging, "Scott's so intelligent; it's just amazing"? Furthermore, is it healthy for children who are very smart or athletic to come to believe that these talents and abilities are truly what's most important about them?

Hence, a simple suggestion, one that has the capacity to make both your children and the world happier and kinder: Reserve your highest praise to your children for when they perform kind deeds. That way, they will learn to identify having high self-regard with being a good person. Children who

grow up associating being praised and loved with the performance of ethical acts are apt to like themselves most when they're doing good. Think

about that for a moment—a generation of people who most like themselves when they're doing good. What a world they would create!

Day 2 - Monday

When You Hear a Siren

HOW DO you react when you're talking with a friend and your conversation is suddenly interrupted by the piercing wail of an ambulance siren? Do you feel pure sympathy for the person inside—or about to be picked up by—the ambulance, or do you feel some measure of annoyance? Similarly, how do you react when you're awakened from a

deep sleep by a series of clanging fire trucks or the wail of a police car?

I am embarrassed to admit that, along with many others, my initial reaction to such noises often is impatience and annoyance rather than empathy. My friend, Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, suggests that whenever we hear the sound of a passing ambulance, we accustom ourselves to offering a prayer that the ambulance arrive in time. Similarly, whenever our sense of calm is interrupted by fire trucks, we should pray to God that the trucks arrive in time to save the endangered people and home and that no firefighter be injured. And when we hear police sirens, we should implore God that the police respond in time to the emergency.

I find this suggestion profound. By accustoming ourselves to uttering a prayer at the very moment we feel unjustly annoyed, we become better and more loving people. The very act of praying motivates us to empathize with those who are suffering and in need of our prayers. Furthermore, imagine how encouraging it would be for those being rushed to a hospital to know that hundreds of people who hear the ambulance sirens are praying for their recovery.

Speaking not long ago in Baltimore, I shared this suggestion. After my talk, several people commented on how moved they were by this idea, but

. . .moral imagination involves "repenting" of evil acts before we commit them, by wielding our imagination in such a manner that we act rightly towards others even when we don't have the experience or knowledge to be fully empathetic.

one woman seemed particularly emotional when she spoke of the suggestion. When she was ten, she told me, she had been awakened from a deep sleep by passing fire trucks. It was almost one in the morning, and now, twenty-five years later, she still remembered her first response: It was so unfair that her sleep had been ruined!

The next morning she learned that her closest friend, a girl who lived only a few blocks away, had died in the fire. Ever since, she told me, whenever she hears fire trucks go by, she prays that they arrive at their destination in time.

Loving one's neighbor is usually carried out through tangible acts, by giving money or food to those in need, by stepping in and offering assistance to a neighbor who is ill, or by bringing guests into one's home. But sometimes, loving our neighbor is expressed through a prayer, one that attaches us to our "neighbor" even when we have no way of knowing just who our neighbor is.

Day 3 - Tuesday

Acting Cheerfully Is Not a Choice

RABBI SHAMMAI, who lived some two thousand years ago, taught: "Receive all people with a cheerful expression."

But what do these words mean—that you're expected to receive someone cheerfully when you yourself are in a bad mood? The answer is, yes. (Obviously, in the rare instance when you're unhappy because of something awful happening in your life, you're not expected to walk around with a phony smile.) The fact that you're feeling unhappy does not entitle you to inflict your bad mood on others.

True, at any given moment you might be unable to control what you're feeling, but that doesn't mean that you can't control how you express yourself. And just as you would prefer to be greeted by someone in a cheerful, pleasant manner, so should you greet others.

I remember once reading of a rabbi who was informed by a student that he had become engaged. Joyous as the news was, the student transmitted this information with a most serious and grave expression on his face. After congratulating the young man, the rabbi instructed him to practice standing in front of a mirror and smiling, "because if you speak to your fiancée with the same expression on your face with which you spoke to me, she will worry that you are upset with her."

The rabbi intuited an important, and seldom mentioned, point. Cheerlessness and moodiness are not victimless "crimes." Those who are around a moody person often feel that they are somehow

responsible for his or her unhappiness. While such individuals might deny that they are responsible for anyone else feeling unhappy, they know in their hearts that it's unpleasant to be with a depressed person. That's why most depressed people, like most upbeat ones, prefer to be around cheerful people.

The rabbi's admonition to the young man reminds us that Shammai's exhortation to receive people cheerfully shouldn't be restricted to acquaintances and people we meet in the street; it's particularly important that we practice such behavior in our homes. I once heard a middle-aged man describe how his father's eyes lit up when his older brother walked into the room, but never when he himself did. Years of living in a home where he seldom experienced his father's "cheerful expression" left this man feeling unloved and unworthy of being loved.

Dennis Prager, the author of *Happiness Is a Serious Problem*, likes to say, "We have a moral obligation to act as cheerfully and happily as we can." A talmudic passage reinforces this and Shammai's teaching by quoting an ancient Jewish proverb: "The man who shows his teeth to his friend in a smile is better than one who gives him milk to drink" (Babylonian Talmud, *Ketubot* 111b). Smiles, too, this text reminds us, are a powerful form of nourishment.

Note: Some people's moodiness is due to chemical and hormonal imbalances and so is beyond their control. I believe that such people have a moral obligation to those around them to seek out the psychological and drug treatments that can redress these imbalances.

Day 4 - Wednesday

"What Good Thing Happened to Me This Week?"

SOME YEARS ago, I attended a service conducted by my friend, Rabbi Leonid Feldman of Palm Beach, Florida. Before it began, he asked if anyone in the congregation had good news that had occurred over the preceding week which he or she wished to share with others. People stood up and announced engagements, anniversaries, the first words spoken by a child or grandchild, a book's publication, a visit by a family member or friend whom they hadn't seen in many years, the completion of a degree, and more.

I was moved. The question, "What good thing happened to you this week?" motivated people to remember the good things that were going on in their lives, and not just their problems.

My wife decided to bring this ritual into our home. At the beginning of each Friday night

Sabbath meal, she asks family members and guests to share something good or memorable that happened to them during the week.

Usually, everyone, even those who have had difficult weeks, can think of at least one pleasurable moment that occurred. In the rare instance someone cannot summon up even one positive recollection, family members or friends generally remember something good that the other person has forgotten.

Even during hard times, we all have experiences or interactions for which we are grateful. It's important to focus on these happy memories even—perhaps particularly—during hard times.

How fitting, therefore, to start today by asking and answering the question my friend posed before his congregation: "What good thing happened to you this week?"

Day 5 - Thursday

Tipping Even Those Whose Faces You Don't See

TIPPING IS a social convention that has as much to do with cowardice as with good service. Although I tip generously those who have been unusually helpful or pleasant, I rarely withhold a tip from one who has been a bit rude or painfully slow in providing service.

On the other hand, there's one individual whom most people ignore, even when the service is exemplary: the housekeeper who cleans their hotel room. We don't ignore a taxi driver, the bellman who takes our bags, or a waiter, because we see these people's faces. However, although the housekeeper does us a service, we rarely see her face or interact with her, and so most of us don't leave a tip. And even if you don't believe a tip is required, shouldn't you at least leave a note expressing thanks to her for the service she has provided?

Part of cultivating a virtuous character is learning to express appreciation to those whom we don't see. After all, prayer is about expressing gratitude to the One whom we never see, but who has bestowed on us the greatest gift: life. Tipping a housekeeper is about expressing gratitude to one with whom we rarely, or never, come into personal contact but who has bestowed on us a lesser, but still much-appreciated, gift: a clean room.

Day 6 - Friday

An Expensive Technique for Overcoming Anger

Part of cultivating a virtuous character is learning to express appreciation to those whom we don't see. After all, prayer is about expressing gratitude to the One whom we never see, but who has bestowed on us the greatest gift: life.

I KNOW a very wealthy man who became religious late in life. He had a quick temper and cursed a lot, which seemed inconsistent with his otherwise pious behavior. A rabbi who had helped influence the man to become religious explained to me: "He's trying to cut down on his cursing, so we've made a deal. Every time he curses, he fines himself \$180, and then donates the money to different charities. So far, he's donated tens of thousands of dollars."

This incident happened more than fifteen years ago, and I've fallen out of touch with the man. I don't know if the \$180 fines helped cause him to curb his cursing, but I suspect they did.

If they didn't, perhaps \$180 was an insufficient disincentive to stop this man from engaging in what had become a deeply ingrained habit. But the technique is an old and a sound one.

A medieval moralistic Jewish text, *The Beginning of Wisdom*, suggests a similar teaching to those who can't seem to control their anger:

Decide on a sum of money that you will give away if you allow yourself to be angered. Be sure that the amount you designate is sufficient to force you to think twice before you lose your temper.

If you're making an effort to control your temper, do this: Over the next week or month, donate to charity the sum of (fill in the amount) every time you express anger that is disproportionate to the provocation.

As *The Beginning of Wisdom* notes, the sum has to be enough to inhibit you and also should be over and above the amount of charity you'd otherwise give; in other words, it acts as a fine.

If this technique doesn't work, try this: Give the charity to a cause you otherwise wouldn't support. If you're a liberal Democrat, designate the charity for a conservative cause; if you're a rock-ribbed conservative, to a liberal one. You might not be happy to send your money to a cause of which you

