

Teaching Moral Sensitivity — and Truth

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"Sheker Ein Lo Raglayim"

The Kohlberg Attraction

Moral development has become a major factor in educational theory. *Mussar* and *middos* have received renewed attention and emphasis in recent years, in recognition that good character traits do not merely happen on their own, but must be inculcated into children by parents and teachers.

The non-Jewish world, in its own way, has also become keenly aware of the need for developing proper ethics and morals, with the theories of Harvard's Lawrence Kohlberg receiving much attention in the academic world. Kohlberg's teachings have had such a major impact on recent trends in educational psychology and methodology that attempts have been made to use his findings in Jewish education, as well. In fact, for the past number of years, a group of Jewish educators has met on campuses of prestigious universities to study Kohlberg's "Six Stages of Moral Development" and their specific application to Hebrew Day Schools.

Though the debates at Harvard and U.C.L.A. do not always attract our interest, a short synopsis of Kohlberg's ideas will demonstrate why they hold such mesmerizing influence over many Jewish educators. Kohlberg has studied various cultures and suggests that there are six stages of development (with a possible seventh) that incorporate universal moral principles shared by all societies. These stages range from the most childish self-involved stage to the most abstract and altruistic. The six stages as delineated by Kohlberg are:

- The Stage of Punishment and Obedience
- The Stage of Individual Instrumental Purpose and Exchange
- The Stage of Mutual Interpersonal Expectations, Relationships and Conformity
- The Stage of Social System and Conscience Maintenance
- The Stage of Prior Rights and Social Contract
- The Stage of Universal Ethical Principles.

A cursory glance at their titles indicates how Kohlberg's system aims at guiding a person into full flowering as an ideal moral human being, for at the final, highest stage, specific laws or social agreements are valid only to the extent that they are in accord with principles of justice and equality. Purity of motive is a given at this stage, and man does what is right because he has accepted the validity of certain principles and has become committed to them.

Virtue is taught through the Socratic method of creating dissatisfaction in students regarding their inadequate knowledge of the good. The teacher facilitates their development by presenting ethical dilemmas, for which the students have no ready solution. In the ensuing discussion, the students become exposed to the opinions of

others, and are most likely to prefer arguments based on a moral stage one level above their own: Moral action is strongly correlated with moral thinking, so it is assumed that the person's actions will rise to the level of his thoughts, and a more moral human being will eventually emerge from the process.

Substitute "*Torah* and *Halachah*" for "justice and equality," and one begins to understand the tantalizing appeal this theory holds for many Orthodox educators. Since our goal is to produce Torah-observant, ethical Jews, the promise of Kohlberg to direct behavior is indeed attractive.

Take, for example, Jerry Friedman, who serves on the National Council of Jewish Federations as well as on the Los Angeles Federation Council, heads the Institute on Cognitive Moral Education, based on the Kohlberg approach, and has become a nationally recognized expert in the field.

He lectures on ethical sensitizing across the country and has been praised for his work by Rabbi Alvin I. Schiff, executive vice president of Greater New York's Board of Jewish Education. His work in the Sinai Akiba Academy in Los Angeles was praised in the L.A. Jewish Journal as a more successful replacement of the "traditional reliance on the study of *Torah* and *Halachah* (Jewish law) and the teacher or *rebbe* as a role model to instill ethical behavior."

A closer analysis of the philosophic moorings that anchor Kohlberg's system, however, should give pause to those who would rush to embrace concepts without questioning the foundations that may belie their surface attraction.

Morality: by Man's Reasoning or G-d's Guidance?

The stages of moral development, delineated by Kohlberg, are meant only to set the framework for defining conflicting claims and choosing between them. They do not attempt to answer the question, "Is there such a thing as an objective moral standard?" — which is essentially a religious question.

On the heels of Socrates, who rejected the idea that "x is just" or "ought to be done" because "x is a command of G-d" or "x is in the Bible," Kohlberg distinguishes between moral and religious forms of thinking and discourse. Morality is a decision-making process, and moral principles are exercised by making choices in resolving moral conflicts. Moral development, in his view, occurs regardless of whether the individual has any particular religious beliefs.

Torah Judaism takes a different approach, for we believe that "virtue" is synonymous with conforming with G-d's Will or command. As opposed to Kohlberg, we believe that moral judgment and consciousness are singularly derived from religious judgment and consciousness and not from human insight or understanding. This difference in approach should be obvious, but the headlong rush towards Kohlberg and his friends on the part of some Jewish educators — though demonstrating that they recognize the desperate need to guide our children in their moral development — also shows that the pervasive influence of secular culture filters down to the Torah community more than we care to admit.

First, then, let us clarify the Torah view on the subject: On what basis do we determine what is and is not moral?

To be sure, every society has its criteria for what is moral and what is not, what is good and what is evil. In the Torah frame of reference, the operative terms of moral thinking are not limited to good and evil, nor to right and wrong, but actually extend to the realm of *emes* and *sheker*, truth and falsehood. That is, a course prescribed by Torah is consistent with the Creator's designs for the world, and one forbidden by Torah runs contrary to His will — which is the essence of all existence.

With this in mind, we can understand that the moral decisions and conflicts facing a Jew are not a choice between two valid alternatives, or even between two options of varying degrees of acceptability, but instead, the realization that there is only one viable possibility. Here it becomes obvious that we and society at large are on divergent paths, and it is precisely this point that non-Orthodox groups cannot grasp. An approach contrary to Torah is a path of falsehood, essentially illusory — not only without value, but without substance. The Torah Jew cannot grant it legitimacy by acknowledging it as a path to be considered, and he surely would not teach his children to deal with falsehood as one of several viable alternatives.

Beginning at an Early Age

At a very early age, we create an awareness in our children of the awesome responsibility that awaits them — to realize their fullest potential as people of the Torah. In the struggles ahead, they should choose good not only for its material benefit or because it is intellectually gratifying, but because one has no other choice if he wishes to be a Torah Jew. To be sure, this is achieved by exercising freedom of choice, but in this context, freedom refers to the ability to acknowledge one's functional imperatives and to act accordingly. Man touches eternity through submission to G-d's Will, eschewing submission to the self, or in the words of the Brisker Rav, "*Bechirah Chofshis* (free will) means choosing to do what you may not wish to do." At every level of maturity, man will confront new manifestations of this same moral conflict: the battle between *emes* and *sheker*. "Falsehood" is a matter of responding to material want and physical desire. "Truth" is humbling one's own will before the Will of G-d. The resolution of this dilemma is always the same: To determine what the Torah's directives are, and to do one's utmost to live by them.

Where Kohlberg's System Fails

From a Torah perspective, there is no essential difference between Kohlberg's stage one and six, or any other such plateau of awareness, conflict and resolution, no matter how valid they may be on their own terms.

Kohlberg's moral standards are man-oriented, with conflicts resolved through the presentation of moral dilemmas. This method, which utilizes a rational process, cannot be reconciled with Torah's approach to education, which sees human opinion as an irrelevant factor in determining correct behavior. Moral conflicts are not resolved through the use of broad principles, admirable though they may be. To the contrary, any decision that is self-centered, without reference to the Divine Will,

cannot be moral.

Though a person may agree that every word of the Torah is true and conform to its' teachings, that alone is insufficient. We are guided by the clear declaration of Rashi (Sanhedrin 90a), regarding the person who believes in *techiyas hameisim* (resurrection of the dead), but does not accept its Torah origins: "*Mah lanu u'l'emunaso? V'chi meheichan hu yode'a shekein hu?* What [value does] his belief [have] to us? And from whence does he know that it is so?" One cannot accept the *mitzvos* in a sequence of "*nishma v'naaseh* — we will understand them and then perform them," for the directives of the Torah are an imperative of nature, not the end product of a host of enlightened choices.

Some Practical Considerations

In our open society, we are subject daily to a myriad of words that aim to entice us and attract us towards whatever product is currently offered, be it a new car or a recycled idea. Such is the characteristic of Esav — "*tzayid befiv* — he has game in his mouth" — i.e., powers of entrapment. And though his advances are often rejected, we frequently forget that this confrontational framework, within which human beings are rendered vulnerable to persuasive seductions, is inimical to Torah, where truth is paramount, self-evident and should not be forced to compete with alternative "truths." Torah is not to be "sold" as a commodity to our students, who will then weigh and measure its words in light of what they currently hold true. Such an approach holds the Torah accountable to human standards, and despite its shining luminescence, its words become subject to questioning and scrutiny, risking weakened commitment and even rejection.

The words of our Sages must be understood not as "interpretation," but as "revelation" — every nuance opening vistas of understanding into both the depths of the human psyche and the secrets of creation.

While we certainly hope to encourage children to probe and analyze, the process is a quest to uncover hidden gateways rather than a struggle to accept convincing argumentation. The Sages are not merely men of superior reasoning, whose words are open to discussion. Rather, they are standard bearers of an image once revealed, whose teachings stand as witness - a faithful rendition of Sinai for subsequent generations. It is not *Divrei Chazal* (the words of the Rabbis of Talmud) that need scrutiny, but rather, the outlook of the recipient, who upon recognizing a discordant note strives to re-adjust his *weltanschauung* accordingly.

It is precisely at this point that the weakness of Kohlberg becomes apparent. Take for example "Sharon's dilemma" — a classic example of the Kohlberg approach.

Sharon's Dilemma

Sharon and her best friend Jill walked into a department store to shop. As they browsed, Jill saw a blouse she really liked and told Sharon she wanted to try the blouse on. While Jill went to the dressing room, Sharon continued to shop. Soon, Jill came out of the dressing room wearing her coat. She caught

Sharon's attention with her eyes and glanced down at the blouse under her coat. Without a word, Jill turned and walked out of the store.

Moments later the store security officer, a salesclerk and the store manager approached Sharon. "That's her, that's one of the girls. Check her bags," blurted the clerk. The security officer pointed to a sign over the door saying that the store reserved the right to inspect bags and packages. Sharon gave him her bag. "No blouse in here," he told the manager. "Then I know the other girl has it," the clerk said. "I saw them just as plain as anything. They were together on this." The security officer then asked the manager if he wanted to follow through on the case. "Absolutely," he insisted. "Shoplifting is getting to be a major expense in running this store. I can't let shoplifters off the hook and expect to run a successful business."

The security officer turned to Sharon. "What's the name of the girl you were with?" he asked. Sharon looked up at him silently. "Come on now; come clean," said the security officer. "If you don't tell us, you can be charged with the crime or with aiding the person who committed the crime."

Question: Should Sharon tell Jill's name to the security officer? Why or why not?

Teacher/Facilitator Probe Questions on Sharon's Dilemma

- Would it make any difference if Sharon and Jill did not know each other very well? Why or why not?
- Is it ever all right to lie? To break the law? If it is, under what circumstances?
- Would it make a difference if Jill had recently reported Sharon for cheating on a test at school? Why or why not? What would happen to society if everybody were to lie, steal or disobey laws whenever they felt like it, or to protect friends ?
- What would the store-owner want Sharon to do? Why? The security officer? Why? Her parents? Why? The police? Why? What obligation does she have to each of these people?

This dilemma is designed to create genuine conflict in the individual participant, and to provoke a lively class discussion of the issues involved. Students are encouraged to take a position and defend it, but at the same time to empathize with and tolerate contrasting views.

Observers of a class discussion following the presentation of such dilemmas have described the classroom atmosphere as “student-oriented” – “debate-like” – “frustrating-no clear answer” – while the teacher’s facilitative role has been characterized as “open to all ideas” – “did not have the answer” – quiet much of the time.”

Clearly, the utilization of this and similar dilemmas, and the manner in which it is presented, should pose almost insurmountable problems for those of us who view ethical behavior and sensitivity as functions of *Limud HaTorah* and *Mussar* – the source material where one carries out his and her quest for eternal truth. The “dilemma” story is designed to arouse feelings of personal loyalty and friendship, and

to direct students to focus upon and clarify their own opinions. In contrast, the Torah Jew is certainly obliged to be aware of these feelings, but they are to be viewed as pitfalls, rather than as a source for decision-making. *Ki HaShochad Yaaver Einei Chachamim* – one’s personal view can only be viewed as a hindrance from a perspective that envisions absolute truth as an objective reality. The mere hint of friendship would disqualify a judge from legal proceedings, all the more so the lay individual, who must eliminate any personal bias if there is to be any hope of moral development.

A Traditional Alternative

Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe, shlit’a, writing of the necessity for *Shimush Talmidei Chachamim* [apprenticing Torah scholars], points in amazement to the diligence with which our sages attached themselves to their teachers, even to the extent of entering their private quarters to observe firsthand how a Jew should behave. “*Tora Hi V’Lilmod Ani Tzarich* – It is Torah and I must learn” (Berachos 62A).

But what of the students of today, many of whom rarely have the opportunity to even see a flesh-and-blood *Talmid Chacham*, much less come in contact with the truly great sages of yesteryear? What are they to do?

“How does one know that when one hears [Torah] from a Jew of modest stature that it should be received as though he hears it from a person wise in Torah? The passage says, ‘[Let these matters] that I command you today.....’ And not just from a wise man, but as though it were from the Sanhedrin...And not...just from the Sanhedrin, but as though from the ‘one shepherd’ – G-d Himself... - Koheles Rabba 12:11

Rabbi Wolbe highlights this passage as illustrating that the value and impact of a message is not dependent upon the greatness of the teacher. To the contrary, one who listens properly can find the words of the most modest of individuals as illuminating as if they were uttered by G-d Himself!

Shmias HaOzen – proper listening, the second of the forty-eight qualities by which Torah is acquired – is the key ingredient of *shimush talmidei chachamim*. Teaching our students to listen properly to the words of our Sages, and:

“to abandon the urge to speak on one's own and develop new modes of thought, but rather find sustenance and support in listening to the words of the Rav with precision and exactitude”.

“To be sure, we are not speaking of blind acceptance, but a deep and all-encompassing comprehension, to the greatest extent possible”.

*“...not to surrender in any way a direct understanding; to the extent a student serves his Rav, he will increase his knowledge, strengthen his wisdom, and purify his independent approach to an understanding of the Torah (Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe, in *Alei Shur*, p. 76).*

The Role of the Teacher

Challenging students to grow beyond themselves — beyond their limited perceptions — that is *our* definition of moral development. The proper role of the teacher in this setting should be to inspire his students to broaden their horizons. This cannot be accomplished by merely exposing them to different ideas, but rather, by demonstrating through word and deed how an individual can subsume and submerge his own identity to the directives of the Torah. In short, he must recreate *Maamad Har Sinai* — the assembly at Mount Sinai — where the entire nation was reborn. His position is never neutral, for he must act as guide, to measure the students' responses on the scales of truth and falsehood; to locate the *sheker* inherent in every difficulty; and to bring his charges closer to *emes*.

Moral growth will never be achieved by an approach that demands less, for unless change is expected from our students, they will merely co-opt whatever information they acquire to fit their pre-existing mindset. Only minor adjustments will be made to satisfy any conflict, and not the complete transformation that *emes* sometimes requires.

Though the teacher need not be a world-class scholar, he must be true to the Torah he teaches. A disembodied understanding of the lesson he is teaching is not Truth. Only if he fulfills the task set out by *Mesillas Yesharim* — "*she'yisbarer v'yisames eitzel ha'adam...* that [these teachings] be clear and truthful to him" — can he be portrayed as a living manifestation of an *emes* worthy of emulation. The truth will speak for itself — "*Chochmos bachutz tarona birchovos titein kolah* — wisdom will resound in the streets, and give voice in the avenues." To adduce support from external sources can only detract from its glistening perfection.

The one dilemma for which we should prepare our students is the conflict wherein man is obliged to "choose life" - the battle between his personal inclination and G-d's command. This conflict is always with us, and within the same parameters, but unlike the Kohlberg approach, its resolution is consistent at every level of development: to be determined by "What is G-d's Will in this situation?" What changes in the process of growing is the amount of truth we have accepted to date, and the more knowledgeable we have become; the more of a *maamin* we have become.

Torah is not merely one more product in the marketplace of ideas. From our vantage point, all man-made theories suffer from one basic shortcoming: they lack the Divine perspective that defines morality. Torah Judaism is not one more niche in an expansive continuum but a means of existence that transcends time and space. We may cajole and entice our students to enter our world, but human constructs of morality will never suffice if we are to make a lasting impact on our children and students — "*V'im ani l'atzmi mah ani?* And if I am for myself, what am I?"

True moral elevation can only progress from a commitment to keeping G-d's commandments. Without this initial commitment, the philosopher at stage six is no closer to G-d than the innocent of stage one. While Kohlberg aims to transform a selfish brute into a sensitive human being who reflects upon his actions, Judaism's goal is the perfect man, G-d's partner in creation, whose life is sanctified by every deed, following a precisely delineated code of conduct.