LEHRHAUS Over Shabbat

Beha'alotekha

Vol. 7, Issue 35 • 20 Sivan 5783 / June 9, 2023

CONTENTS: Levin (Page 1); Grant (Page 9) Eichenbaum (Page 11)

June's Lehrhaus Over Shabbat is sponsored by Lauren and David Lunzer to commemorate the 26th yahrtzeit of David's mother, Beila Raizel bas HaRav Binyamin, on 28 Sivan.

Rebuke, Repentance, and Renewal: A Literary Analysis of David's Character in II Samuel 12

Natan Levin is currently a sophomore at the Jay and Jeanie Schottenstein Honors program in Yeshiva College

Introduction[1]

The twelfth chapter of II Samuel focuses on the direct ramifications of David's wrongdoings in the previous chapter, including his adultery with Batsheva and unjustified demand that Uriyah — her husband and a soldier in the king's army — be put to death.[2] A close reading of the chapter reveals the essential role that its obscure details play within the narrative's progression, allowing for a greater appreciation of David's character development and sympathetic persona.

The chapter can be naturally divided into five distinct sections, providing a useful framework for analysis:

i) The prophet Natan's parable and David's response (12:1-6)[3]
ii) The revelation of the parable's referent and Natan's rebuke of David (12:7-12)
iii) David's confession and Natan's response (12:13-14)
iv) David's first child's death and Shlomo's birth (12:15-25)
v) The People of Israel's war with *Ammon* (12:26-31)

Several questions immediately jump out at the reader upon encountering the text: (1) Conceptually speaking, why does Natan give a parable to David?

[1] I would like to express my immense gratitude to Rabbi Chanoch Waxman, who contributed to the development and refinement of the ideas presented in this article.

[2] While some strains within the rabbinic literature read these events otherwise — as will be noted later — I contend that the reading presented here is the text's simple meaning.

[3] All unspecified citations are from II Samuel, and translations are from Sefaria, unless otherwise noted.

Would it not be preferable to offer direct admonition instead of an oblique critique? (2) A closer look at the parable reveals an exclusive emphasis upon the upper class's oppression of the lower instead of sexual immorality and the value of human life, which at first glance would seem to better reflect David's misdeed. Why does the parable ignore the actual sins that David commits? (3) Furthermore, despite the conspicuous absence of David's adultery and indirect murder, it remains obvious to the reader that David is the parable's true subject. However, David himself is completely oblivious to that fact. How is he so ignorant as to not realize that the parable reflects upon him? (4) In the third section of the chapter, David's response to Natan's rebuke is ambiguous when analyzed in a vacuum: "I have sinned to the Lord" (12:13). How should this confession be evaluated? (5) The chapter's fourth section includes many details that are *prima facie* superfluous, including an exhaustive recounting of David's plea on behalf of his sick child and an extended dialogue between him and his servants. What is the greater symbolic value of these minutiae? (6) Finally, assuming the significance of their juxtaposition, what is the thematic relationship between the war with the nation of *Ammon*, completed in the fifth section, and the rest of the chapter? This article will attempt to address these questions in pursuit of a coherent and comprehensive account of David's character development throughout the chapter.

Above the Law

To address the first number of questions, the parable requires further consideration. First, a quick synopsis is in order: To feed a visiting guest, a wealthy man steals a poor person's lone sheep instead of taking one from his own sizable flock. The wealthy person represents David, the poor man Uriyah, and the sheep Batsheva,[4] highlighting David's effective thievery of Batsheva from her first husband Uriyah. Delving deeper into the parable's message, we can first analyze the original descriptions of the two men. In verse two, the rich person receives a concise summation of his plentiful possessions: "The rich man had very large flocks and herds." In stark contrast, the text embellishes the poor man's connection to his "only" lamb, even claiming that it was "like a daughter to him" (12:3).[5] This distinction reveals the discrepancy between the two protagonists' views regarding their surrounding society. The rich person towers over the rest of the world, treating it as his dominion, whereas the poor man creates an authentic bond with his environment and relates to it on a human level. Further emphasizing this theme, the three verbs relating the poor person to his sheep are *a-kh-l* (*tokhal*), *sh-t-h* (*tishteh*), *and sh-kh-v* (*tishkav*)—

[4] The imagery of a lamb personifying Batsheva is reminiscent of the foremothers Rachel and Rivkah, both of whose names are used elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible in reference to sheep (see Genesis 32:15, for example). This provides an additional layer of meaning to an otherwise strange detail, hinting at Batsheva's innocence and righteousness.

[5] In *Megillah* 13a, R. Meir posits that the word *bat* — "daughter" in this verse can also be read as *bayit* — "house" (which in this context connotes a spousal relationship), highlighting its reference to Batsheva, Uriyah's wife.

eating, drinking, and lying (12:3). These same three verbs are used to connect Uriyah to his household and to Batsheva in the previous chapter. Responding to David's demand that he reside in his home while the rest of the military carries on with its attack, Uriyah exclaims, "How can I go home and **eat** (*le'ekhol*) and **drink** (*ve-lishtot*) and **sleep** (*ve-lishkav*) with my wife?" (11:11). This repetition emphasizes the contrast between Uriyah's intimate relation with his environs and David's artificial separation from his. Continuing in the parable, Natan originally terms the visitor for whom the wealthy person eventually steals the poor man's sheep a *heilekh* — "walker" (12:4).[6] This is reminiscent of the impetus for David's sin with Batsheva. He first encounters Batsheva's beauty while ***va-yithaleikh*** *al gag beit ha-melekh* — "he ***was*** **walk**[**ing**] on the roof of the king's house," thereby highlighting the guest's function in the parable as a catalyst for wrongdoing (11:2). Just as the parable's "walker" precipitates the rich man's thievery, David commits adultery with Batsheva as a direct result of his stroll upon his roof.[7] An interesting hermeneutical discourse in the Babylonian Talmud arrives at a similar conclusion through an astute observation regarding the varied terms used in reference to the guest in verse four. Rava points out that the text initially refers to the guest in the parable as a "*heilekh*" - "walker," later an "*orei'ah*" - "guest," and finally an "*ish*" - "man," and asserts that this progression reflects the rise to prominence of the rich man's evil inclination.[8] In the parable's conclusion, Natan relays that *"vayahmol* ***lakahat*** *mitzono…* ***vayikah*** *et kibsat ha-ish ha-rash"* — "[the rich person] was loath to **take** anything from his own flock… so he **took** the poor man's lamb" (12:4). The verse twice uses the root (*l-k-h)* - "take," emphasizing a theme that appears throughout the book of Samuel — oppression and self-absorption via immoral seizure of property.[9] This word choice again hints at David's self-perception of being above the law, as his counterpart in the parable abuses the poor nonchalantly.

A final note about this section of the chapter: as previously mentioned, the parable enigmatically focuses upon the abstract idea of oppressing the underprivileged as opposed to David's actual sins of murder and adultery. This can be readily understood in light of the parable's larger insight regarding David's persona elaborated upon in the preceding paragraph. David's hubris and abuse of power are best represented by the mistreatment of society's lower class, and the specificities of his wrongdoing

[6] I prefer this literal translation than the more commonly used "traveler" in order to emphasize the parallel expounded upon in the following sentences.

[7] Another interesting detail to note is that David "looks down" upon Batsheva, providing symbolic imagery of David's perception that he is "above" the rest of society.

[8] *Sukkah* 52b.

[9] The verses notably use this root in the contexts of the lead priest Eli's corrupt sons and the *mishpat ha-Melekh,* "King's Code" that Samuel uses to deter the nation's request for a king in the second and eighth chapters of I Samuel, respectively. Interestingly enough, the text hints at a parallel between Eli's sons and David, using the grammatical roots *n-a-tz*, meaning "spurn" and *b-z-h*, meaning "desecrate," in relation to each of their behaviors towards God, further suggesting the conception of David's character presented heretofore (I Samuel 2:17, 30; Ⅱ Samuel 12:7, 14).

are natural manifestations of his self-centered worldview.[10]

Under the impression that the parable is a court case upon which he is expected to provide a ruling, David metes out a harsh punishment to the parable's antagonist, saturated with moral indignation. In fact, as the text records, "David flew into a rage against the [wealthy] man" (12:5). At first glance, this reaction should surprise the reader. After all, David has committed the highest degree of sexual immorality and unjustifiably ordered the assassination of a fellow Jew. Why is he suddenly appalled by unethical behavior?[11] The text accentuates this irony through a parallel between David's response to Natan's parable and Uriyah's categorical rejection in the previous chapter of David's demand that he remain at home while the rest of the military continues battling.. Firstly, both David — "as the Lord lives" (12:5) — and Uriyah — "as you live, by your very life" (11:11) — use the language of an oath in expression of their passionate indignation.[12] Furthermore, both heed moral intuitions in their responses, acting beyond their basic responsibilities. Instead of prescribing the typically imposed fine of four times restitution upon the thief,[13] David both orders that "the man who did this deserves to die," and that "he shall pay for the lamb eight times over" (12:5-6).[14] Similarly, although he has the permission to abandon his fellow soldiers at war and retire to his house, Uriyah follows his ethical sense and insists against doing so:

> Uriyah answered David, "The Ark and Israel and Judah are located at Succoth, and my master Joab and Your Majesty's men are camped in the open; how can I go home and eat and drink and sleep with my wife? As you live, by your very life, I will not do this!" (11:11).

This parallel to Uriyah reflects two interesting character traits that David possesses. On the positive side, David has clearly inculcated the moral values of compassion and kindness, as he is genuinely appalled at the rich man's oppression of the poor. On the negative side, however, David fails

---

[10] It should be mentioned that some commentators read the omission of David's adultery and murder as an expression of Natan's desire that David not determine the parable's true meaning.

[11] Shmuel Klitsner notes this irony in his essay on the chapter as well. In fact, many of the insights offered in this article overlap with Klitsner's analysis. I would like to express my appreciation to Rabbi David Fried for bringing this to my attention. Shmuel Klitsner, "Victims, Victimizing and the Therapeutic Parable: A New Interpretation of II Samuel Chapter 12." *Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought* 46, no. 1 (2013): 25-42. http://www.jstor.org/stable/24389353.

[12] Blane Conklin, *Oath Formulas in Biblical Hebrew* (Penn State Press 2011), 24-25.

[13] While most rightfully associate the *keifel* penalty, or twice the value, as punishment with regard to a thief, one incurs an additional punishment of four or five times the value by stealing sheep or cattle (Exodus 22:1).

[14] I am following Radak's interpretation (four times two), though some read *arbatayim* as the usual four-times payment. Others read it as sixteen times the amount he stole (four times four).

to notice the obvious relevance of his ethical beliefs to his own actions. Once again, the confluence of these two attributes lends itself to the understanding that David unconsciously places himself on a different moral plane than the rest of society.[15]

Reversal of David's Standing

In his response to David's ruling, Natan reveals the purported court case's true meaning and subsequently doles out punishments for David's transgression. Throughout this second section of the chapter (12:7-12), David's previously established self-perception is completely reversed on the thematic and literary planes. First, Natan asks David, "***Madu'a*** *bazita et devar Hashem*?" - "**Why** have you flouted the command of the Lord?" in critique of David's behavior (12:9). This usage of a rhetorical question and of the word "*madu'a*" as an expression of castigation echoes David's own question to Uriyah in the previous chapter. In reaction to Uriyah's refusal to heed his instruction, David asks, *"**Madu'a** lo yaradta el beitekha? "* - "**Why** didn't you go down to your house [as I commanded of you]?" (11:10). Using Natan as a medium, God ironically alludes to David's behavior towards Uriyah, in effect asking: How could you think that you have the right to demand the obeisance of others when you fail to obey a Divine mandate? The punishments' specificities and the language Natan utilizes when relaying them to David hint at this same point through the device known in the rabbinic literature as *middah ke-neged middah*, measure for measure. The first component of David's punishment is that "the **sword** shall never depart from your house," mirroring David's assassination of Uriyah:"You have struck Uriyah the Hittite with the **sword**" (12:9-10). Its second component, that "I [God] will **take** your wives before your very eyes," reflects David's taking of Batsheva: "and you **took** the wife of Uriyah the Hittite [Batsheva] to be your wife," while simultaneously emphasizing David's willingness to "take" without authority or moral right (12:10-11).[16] Additionally, God rescinds the provisions he had previously given to David. Natan tells David in God's name,

> I **gave** you your master's house and possession of your master's wives; and I **gave** you the House of Israel and Judah; and if that were not enough, I would give you twice as

[15] Returning to the parable, the verses describe the rich man's unwillingness to give his own sheep to the visitor as "he **was merciful** towards his own flocks and herds and did not take them" (12:4; translation mine). During his castigation of the rich man, David explains that the rich man deserves punishment because "he showed **no mercy**" to the poor man (12:6). In effect, David points out that the rich man's "mercy" is misplaced: instead of exhibiting it in his conduct with his livestock, he should have done so in his dealing with the poor man. By highlighting this flaw in the rich man — who represents David in the parable — David ironically incriminates himself: he too misplaces his mercy, showing it to the imaginary poor man by giving him justice through punishing the wealthy person but failing to live up to that standard in his real-life treatment of Uriyah.

[16] Additionally, Natan's appendage to this second component, that it will be done "before [David's] very eyes," highlights David's inability to take action against God's retribution, again hinting at a reversal of David's god-like self-perception.

> much more (12:8).

But now, in light of David's sin,

> Thus said the Lord: 'I will make a calamity rise against you from within your own house; I will take your wives and **give them to another man** before your very eyes and he shall sleep with your wives under this very sun (12:14).

God originally "gave" to David, and as punishment "give[s]" to his neighbors from him, constituting another revocation of David's power. Natan's concluding remark, that David has acted "in secret," whereas God will exact retribution "in the sight of all Israel and in broad daylight," explicitly picks up on this theme of reversal (12:12). Finally, returning to the chapter's first verse, the text records that "the Lord sent Natan to David," which mimics David's own "sending" throughout the previous chapter.[17] However, while chapter 11 portrays David as a ruler meting out orders to his messengers, God reveals himself to be the true King by "send[ing]" Natan in chapter 12. In sum, as demonstrated by the many thematic and literary reversals of David's self-image throughout Natan's reproof, God effectively belittles David and downgrades his status from that of almighty king to normal civilian.

David and Sha'ul's Confessions

At the chapter's climax, David admits to his wrongdoing, exclaiming, "I have sinned to the Lord" (12:13). As mentioned previously, this admission appears somewhat cryptic at first glance. One might claim that the brevity of David's confession testifies to a deficiency in his internalization of Natan's admonition; instead of emotionally soliloquizing about his immorality, David limits his repentance to the minimum requirement. However, upon further analysis, this reading proves untenable. Instead, David's admission constitutes a watershed and reflects a truly significant internal moment.

A natural comparison comes to mind between David's confession in Ⅱ Samuel 12 and Sha'ul's in Ⅰ Samuel 15, serving as an illuminating frame of reference in order to understand David's confession on a deeper level. In Ⅰ Samuel 15*,* Sha'ul, David's predecessor, ignores God's command to completely eradicate the nation of Amalek by leaving its king and cattle alive, which leads to an intense rendezvous with Samuel. When comparing these two narratives, a clear parallel emerges. Thematically, both chapters feature a prophet harshly reprimanding the king for failing to adhere to a Divine command, eventually leading to an admission of wrongdoing. Similar to David, Sha'ul is originally unaware of his misdeeds, exclaiming, "I have fulfilled the Lord's command" (I Samuel 15:13). Also similar to David, he performs an act of seizure against God's will: "and [he] took… from the spoil[s of Amalek] some sheep and oxen" (I Samuel 15:21). The parallel is further manifest within each of the prophets' rebukes. Indeed, Natan explicitly links David to Sha'ul, pointing out that "[The Lord]

[17] The motif of David sending others surfaces six times over the course of chapter 11 (11:1, 4, 6, 12, 14, & 27).

rescued you from the hand of Sha'ul" (12:7). Additionally, Natan prefaces his critique of David by emphasizing that "I [The Lord] anointed you king over Israel," as does Samuel with regards to Sha'ul, claiming, "The Lord anointed you king over Israel" (12:7; I Samuel 15:17). Furthermore, both prophets rhetorically ask "why" each king committed his misconduct as well as stress that the king had performed "that which displeases The Lord" (12:9; I Samuel 15:19). A final component common to the two chapters finds expression in the kings' punishments, as each contains the motif of God's appropriation of the king's possessions to his fellows. As noted earlier, God relates that he "will take [David's] wives and give them to another man" (12:11), and Samuel explains that "God has this day torn the kingship over Israel away from [Sha'ul] and has given it to another who is worthier than you" (I Samuel 15:28).

Against this background of textual and topical similarities, a number of differences clearly stand out. As previously argued, David has a strong — albeit inconsistent — moral instinct, as evidenced by his recognition of the problematic nature of the rich man's conduct in the parable. In contrast, Sha'ul — either in earnest or in an attempt to deceive Samuel — does not realize his wrongdoing even after Samuel explicitly hints at it:

> "Then what," demanded Samuel, "is this bleating of sheep in my ears, and the lowing of oxen that I hear?" Saul answered, "They were brought from the Amalekites, for the troops spared the choicest of the sheep and oxen for sacrificing to the Lord your God…" (I Samuel 15:14-15).[18]

As opposed to Sha'ul, David has successfully cultivated an ethical sense, paving the way for his full repentance. Additionally, David immediately confesses his error when confronted by Natan, in contradistinction to Sha'ul's initial insistence that "I did obey the Lord! I performed the mission on which the Lord sent me" (I Samuel 15:20). Even after admitting to his transgression, Sha'ul attempts to absolve himself of blameworthiness by diverting it to the nation: "I was afraid of the troops and I yielded to them" (I Samuel 15:24). Furthermore, after acknowledging his sin, Sha'ul demands that God "bear [his] sin now" (I Samuel 15:25).[19] David makes no such request, effectively bowing his head in submission to the Divine judgment. Through this lens, the conciseness, immediacy, and absoluteness of David's confession reflect his genuine internalization of God's critique.

[18] The theme of misplaced mercy again surfaces in this context, as Sha'ul and the nation "took mercy" on the Amalekite livestock in direct violation of God's command, providing another support for this parallel (refer to footnote 15 above).

[19] In other words, acquit him of consequences.

A New David

The apparently superfluous length and detail in the chapter's fourth section (12:15-25), which describes the death of David's first child and Shlomo's birth, can be better understood in light of David's character renewal. The text relates that "he entreat[s] God on behalf of [his son]," signifying David's acknowledgement of God's omnipotence (12:16). The imagery of David fasting and sleeping on the ground symbolizes his lowering himself down to the level of his subjects, indeed lower than them (12:16). Furthermore, we are told that "he refuse[s]" the servants' attempted comforting "and [does] not partake of food with them," remaining firm in his abstention from any form of physical pleasure (12:17).[20] Most instructively, in response to his servants' question regarding the apparent irrationality of his mourning for his child while his child was alive and his subsequent cessation once he died, David explicitly acknowledges God's absolute power and his own limitations:

> He replied, "While the child was still alive, I fasted and wept because I thought: 'Who knows? The Lord may have pity on me, and the child may live.' But now that he is dead, why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? …" (12:22-23).

In this final rhetorical question, "can I bring him back again?" David demonstrates a categorical acceptance of God's total supremacy over the natural world — including his own self and child. David's self-resignation to God's will and power again points towards his authentic growth.

This positive reading of David is further bolstered by a thematic parallel to his heroic ancestor, Yehudah, in Genesis 38. In both narratives, the protagonist originally separates himself from society, engages in questionable sexual behavior, and eventually recognizes his wrongdoing immediately after having been admonished for it (Genesis 38:26; II Samuel 11:1).[21] Furthermore, Yehudah and David father children who ultimately contribute to the kingship of the Jewish people in a meaningful way as a direct consequence of their original missteps. Peretz, a recognizable symbol of the Davidic dynasty, is born to Yehudah as a result of his sexual relations with Tamar (Bereishit 38:21);[22] Batsheva, after her first son with David passes away, gives birth to Shlomo, David's eventual successor and the builder of the First Temple . In fact, the text highlights Solomon's uniqueness directly following his birth, as "the Lord favored him" and "he was named [by Natan] Yedidyah [i.e., 'Beloved of the Lord']" (12:24-25). This similarity demonstrates that, when evaluated holistically, the

[20] Interpreted from another angle, through taking these steps, David overcomes his hedonistic desires for instant gratification that originally caused him to err with Batsheva.

[21] Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik terms Yehuda's repentance as "the great cathartic act, which cleansed him and redeemed his life," highlighting the significance of this process in Yehuda's development (Joseph B. Soloveitchik, "Catharsis," 54).

[22] For example, the fourth chapter of the book of Ruth records a genealogy beginning with Peretz and concluding with David (Ruth 4:18-22).

transformation David undergoes in chapters 11 and 12 is constructive and beneficial.

War with *Ammon*: Reversion or Continuation?

As touched upon previously, the chapter's most perplexing section is arguably its final one, consisting of the Israelite people's battle with their rival nation *Ammon* (12:26-31). What is the connection between David's character progression and a military victory over *Ammon*? Some of this episode's details hint at David's regression to his former, egoistic self. David unhesitantly accedes to his general Yo'av's suggestion that David strike the final blow in order to attain honor and glory (12:28). Additionally, David "took" the Ammonite king's crown as well as their loot, both echoing the theme of "taking" that appeared prior to David's confession and symbolically highlighting David's willingness to place himself above others (12:30-31). However, when considered more broadly, David corrects for the original cause of his sin by joining his fellow brothers in battle (12:29). In the verse preceding David's original observation of Batsheva's beauty, the narrator records the nation initiating its battle with *Ammon* in the city of Rabbah while "David remained in Jerusalem" (11:1). This self-imposed removal from the rest of his nation foreshadows his self-centeredness in the remainder of the chapter, as he commits adultery with Batsheva and narcissistically murders Uriyah. On this backdrop, David's physical entrance into the war symbolizes his rejoining society and humanity on the psychological and spiritual planes. As such, the war with *Ammon* functions as a further stage in David's religious and interpersonal maturation.

Conclusion

In summation, we may view chapter 12 as depicting David's transformation from an egotistical and apathetic ruler to a religiously submissive man of the people. Aside from the literary value in the text's apparent meaning, reading the chapter as a presentation of David's complex and nuanced character allows him to function as a true role model to whom the reader can relate. Despite his missteps along the way, a holistic account of David's journey reveals that he simultaneously serves as a paragon of virtue deserving of praise as well as someone who is ultimately human with whom the reader can identify.

Bread of Life

DJ Grant holds a B.A. in English, Emphasis Literature, from The University of British Columbia.

I am a six-strand loaf of braided challah bread,
delivering myself on a silver platter
to the party of life, for social consumption.

Each strand of the loaf is
a different flavor, a distinct essence,
folded together to create me.

Each vital limb combines to create
my beautiful whole, like a mountain range
with twelve variant peaks leading to Sinai.

Each elevation of the braid equals twelve,
bending into valleys and crests that recall the
trials of the tribes of my ancestors.

Here is my recipe.

Serves: Humanity

Ingredients

Strand 1) **Plain**

What you see is what you get.
I am honest. I am direct and clear.
I mean what I say.

Strand 2) **Everything but the Bagel**

I am steadfast in everything I do,
in every direction I point myself,
with a ripple effect of aftershocks.
When I walk, my footsteps quake and echo.
A bit of everything, I am abundant.

Strand 3) **Stuffed Roasted Tomatoes, Feta, Garlic, and Herbs**

I am a complex, multilayered blend
of sweet, smooth, and savory spice.
Prepared with patience, bred by
the struggles and joys of life,
serving humility and wisdom.

Strand 4) **Cinnamon and Sugar**

I am extra sweet, featuring delicate
subtle nuances, with a crunchy bite.
Infused with spice of our heritage,
I am a comforting flavor
of memory and tradition.

Spice of slavery, spice of Exodus,
fragrance of my lover's clothes.
Anoint yourself with my oil;
use my recipe to sanctify your soul.
Praise the food of freedom.

Strand 5) **Peanut Butter Chocolate Chip**

I am mouth-watering, full of surprises.
My lovers indulge in me; I indulge in myself.
I sing. I celebrate the songs of Paradise
that echo from the mountaintops.

Strand 6) **Za'atar**

My flavors are bold and intense,
intelligently textured, refined.
Challah baking is ritual making,
every Shabbat, a dance in thyme.

My lungs expand with
the zesty air of fresh herbs,
the breath of life, the bread of life.
God's voice in a column of light.

Baking Instructions

Ignite the fire of my soul.
Take a pinch of me to
blaze in ritual offering.
Inhale the aroma of ascension.

Braid my six diverse strands into one body,
then let me rise up again before baking.
With the bread of ceremony, I will ascend.

All portions united are not
alone from our Creator's hands.

I will grow with truth of self
as my unique branches begin
to expand into each other,
a tangle of variations on the same me.

My limbs extend to reach Zion.
I grow fruit of wisdom.
I am a Tree of Life, I am Mother.

Each strand is elastic,
intertwining with each other
in a warm woven lover's embrace.

After baking, I become
one nourishing vibrant loaf
of freedom leavened, of manna manifested
in the image of God.

Allow me to cool before serving.

ENJOY ME!

Judaism's Hidden Road to Character

Marc Eichenbaum is the Rabbinic Researcher for Yeshiva University's Sacks-Herenstein Center for Values and Leadership

Educators strive to adjust their curricula to fit their students' needs. At no time has this been more apparent than in recent years, when rapid technological advances have accelerated the speed in which trends, social mores, and ways of thinking come and go. If this is the case in our general education classes, it is certainly true when it comes to character education which, as the Hebrew word for character traits, *middot*, indicates, is fundamentally dependent on *measuring*, or taking into account context and setting. When looking for ways to improve character education in our schools, we ought to look to the wisdom of our sages, whose answers to a peculiar question shed light on the proper way to impart character development to our students in modern times. As we will see, many of these insights converge with research findings in the fields of educational psychology and neuroscience.

Throughout the ages, rabbinic authorities have written about the importance of character development. However, while the Torah extols specific traits such as empathy (e.g., Deut. 23:8), hospitality (e.g., Genesis 18:3), justice, loving kindness, humility (e.g., Micah 6:8), and love (e.g., Deut. 6:5; Lev. 19:34; Lev. 19:18), and prescribes specific commandments against certain negative character traits such as hate (e.g., Lev. 19:17), and jealousy (e.g., Exodus 20:14), one would be hard pressed to find a clear biblical mandate to develop one's character. To be sure, most authorities were not bothered by this dilemma. They maintained, in slightly different ways, that ethical character development is part and parcel of many of the *mitzvot* of the Torah; having a distinct *mitzvah* is redundant.[1] Interestingly, however, many

[1] It is quite easy to see this connection for certain *mitzvot*. For example, by adhering to the laws governing *lashon ha-ra*, forbidden speech, as derived from Leviticus 19:16, one's speech towards their fellow is naturally shaped for the better. Similarly, the various verses mandating proper financial behavior should engender a sense of honesty and a sense of sensitivity to the plight of the underprivileged. Indeed, some have classified many of the 613 *mitzvot* as affecting one's

authorities weren't satisfied with this approach and offered alternative explanations for why the Torah doesn't explicitly mandate character development. An analysis of why these particular authorities sought out other, seemingly unnecessary, answers to this dilemma is fascinating, but beyond the scope of this essay. Instead, we will focus on just three of these novel answers and show how they can enhance character education in our schools.[2]

Approach 1: Character Development is a Prerequisite to the Torah

One of the first to ask and answer our question explicitly is R. Hayyim Vital (1542-1620). In his *Sha'arei Kedushah* (1:2), R. Vital writes that, "the good and bad traits… are the seat, foundation, and root of the foundational soul, upon which depend the 613 *mitzvot*… It is for this reason that the character traits are not included among the 613 *mitzvot*. They serve, however, as the primary preparation for the 613 *mitzvot*." R. Vital follows the path of Nachmanides (Comments to Maimonides' *Sefer Ha-Mitzvot* 1) who argues that the *Ba'al Halakhot Gedolot* did not count the *mitvzah* of *emunah,* faith in God, as one of the 613 *mitzvot* because it is a prerequisite to fulfillment of the rest of the *mitzvot*. Apparently, this approach sees proper character as so fundamental to Judaism that it doesn't even need to be an explicit *mitzvah*. R. Vital understands the phrase of Hazal (*Leviticus Rabbah* 9:3), "*derech eretz kadmah le-Torah* – proper behavior precedes the Torah," literally; one must actually improve his or her character if the Torah is to have a spiritually positive effect. Character development is not mentioned in the Torah because it is the foundation upon which all else stands.

There are several obvious implications of this approach when it comes to imparting the importance of character development to our students. Perhaps most saliently, this approach suggests that character development should not take a back seat to the rest of our children's education. If something is indeed the prerequisite of our religion, as R. Vital claims, we must ensure that our students receive that message. This means that discussions about ethics and character should not be relegated solely to the home or presumed to be learned through osmosis. Rather, it must take a significant place in our educational system at school as well. We must avoid the brief "*hilul Hashem* pep talk"—given prior to embarking on a school trip in which students are guilted into thanking their bus driver and cleaning up the garbage from the school bus, lest they cause a desecration of God's name for not doing so—turning into one of the only memorable messages about ethical behavior that our students receive. This type of messaging depicts the place of character as something to be pursued solely to avoid negative reactions, and not something inherently valuable and foundational to Judaism.

personal character. See the introduction to R. Bahye Ibn Pakuda's *Chovot Ha-Levavot* and Maimonides in *Moreh Nevukhim* (3:35) and *Mishneh Torah* (The Laws of *Temurah* 4:13). For an alternative approach, see R. Avraham Yeshaya Karelitz's *Faith and Trust* (Chapter 4).

[2] I plan to publish a thorough analysis of all of the available answers to this question at a different time.

R. Vital's position on the supreme importance of character education relates to a similar idea in contemporary educational literature, which suggests ways to discuss character and values within many types of classroom studies. English teachers, for example, are directed to discuss virtues within the literature they are assigning in class. History teachers are encouraged to use historical events as an avenue to discuss human interests, and science teachers can engage their students in conversation about the natural environment, social psychology, and the ethical concerns of biochemical engineering. Mathematics teachers can teach their students the importance of diligence, patience, and integrity when handling data. Even physical education can offer great opportunities to discuss teamwork, fairness, and courage.[3]

If character development can be embedded within secular studies classes, it can certainly be discussed more frequently within Judaic studies curricula as well. In our *halakhah* classes, it is worthwhile to teach laws governing interpersonal relationships in addition to the laws governing rituals such as *berakhot* and *Shabbat*. While many schools spend significant time in their Talmud courses teaching tractates in *Nezikin* which speak about how one relates to the property of others, more time can be spent discussing the broader ethical elements that these laws are trying to convey.

Lastly, R. Vital's comments touch upon another important point that is remarkably similar to findings in psychological research. In recent years it has become commonplace amongst American schools to include Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) programs to enhance students' competencies in self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making.[4] Not only have SEL programs been consistently found to enhance students' social and emotional skills and wellbeing, they have also been linked to enhanced academic performance as well.[5] There are a variety of explanations for this phenomenon, but what's clear is that the development of character and related competencies are important for intellectual pursuits and performance. This finding mirrors R. Vital's assertion that because character traits are "naturally embedded in the lowly, fundamental soul of man… [the higher] intellectual soul is powerless to fulfill the *mitzvot* with the 613 organs of the body except through the agency of the fundamental soul which is connected to the body." Although different in content, both R. Vital and psychological studies conclude that character development is strongly

---

[3] James Arthur, Kristján Kristjánsson, Tom Harrison, Wouter Sanderse, and Daniel Wright, "Classroom-based approaches to character education" in *Teaching Character and Virtue in Schools* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 70-93.

[4] Roger Weissberg, Joseph Durlak, Celine Domitrovich, and Thomas Gullotta, (2015), 'Social and emotional learning: Past, present, and future," *Handbook of social and emotional learning: Research and practice*, ed. J.A. Durlak, C.E.Domitrovich, R.P. Weissberg, & T.P. Gullotta (New York, NY, Guilford Press, 2015) 3-19.

[5] Michael Wiglesworth, Ann Lendrum, Jeremy Oldfield, A. Scott, Isabel ten Bokkel, Kyrah Tate, and C. Emery,), "The impact of trial stage, developer involvement and international transferability on universal social and emotional learning programme outcomes: A meta-analysis," *Cambridge Journal of Education* 46 (2016): 347-376.

correlated with, and likely influences, behavior and performance. This suggests that in addition to teaching character development in our schools because of its inherent value, it will also aid in both the performance of *mitzvot* and academic success.

Approach 2: Character Development Must be Natural

A second fascinating approach to our question is offered by R. Avraham Yitzchak HaKohen Kook (1865-1935). Commenting on the statement of Hazal that the patriarchs and matriarchs fulfilled the Torah even before it was given at Sinai, R. Kook (*Iggerot Ha-Ra'aya*, letter 89) argues that it is indeed greater, specifically when it comes to *mitzvot* related to "the moral realm," to fulfill the *mitzvot* out of a natural inclination that arises out of "charity and the love of kindness" than to fulfill them as a Divine mandate. For if one fulfills them out of "mandatory *halakhah*," "one cannot measure the magnitude of the loss that human culture would suffer." A compulsive Divine mandate, argues R. Kook, would actually upend the purpose of the *mitzvah,* as its legalistic nature of a command would dampen one's inner desire to do good to others. The reason why there is no *mitzvah* for character development and ethical behavior is because having one would be counterproductive and spiritually erosive.

The idea that character should be natural coalesces with research in character education as well. It has been shown that the best character curricula are careful to cultivate self-motivation and altruism by not putting excessive emphasis on extrinsic incentives.[6] The schools that utilize this model emphasize opportunities for reflection as opposed to compliance. Mistakes are viewed as opportunities to learn and improve, and not reasons for punishment.

One of the common features of many of our schools is "*hesed* hours," where students are tasked with accumulating a designated number of hours engaged in volunteer activity throughout the academic year. Failure to accumulate and document these hours is detrimental to one's grade. While this method may motivate some students to engage in charitable activities that they might not have otherwise, students often try to fulfill their requirements begrudgingly, and sometimes even through chicanery. Rather than engender an intrinsic love of ethical character and behavior, this requirement instills within some of our students that *hesed* is a burden or a box to check off. The naturalness of which R. Kook spoke is missing from this primary method of character education in schools. As a result, the program does not tend to have the intended effects.

While one need not advocate for the abolishment of these requirements, the way in which it is framed should be shifted to a message of empowerment as opposed to one of compulsion. Perhaps rewarding students who engage in these hours, as opposed to punishing those who don't, would encourage

[6] James Arthur, Kristján Kristjánsson, Tom Harrison, Wouter Sanderse, and Daniel Wright, "Classroom-based approaches to character education" in *Teaching Character and Virtue in Schools* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 70-93.

stronger participation and character development. Furthermore, educators should strive to identify and praise the ethical behavior exhibited by their students outside the context of *hesed* hours for further organic positive reinforcement.

Approach 3: The Power of Stories

R. Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin (Netziv; 1816-1893) in his *Ha'emek Davar*, wonders why Hazal (*Avodah Zarah* 25a) refer to the book of Genesis as *Sefer Ha-Yashar,* the Book of the Upright. R. Berlin's thesis is that the term *yashar*, upright, connotes ethical civil behavior and character. The stories of our forefathers in the book of Genesis, in *Sefer Ha-Yashar*, are meant to teach us the importance of ethical character and behavior, which "sustain the world."[7] R. Berlin doesn't address our question directly, nor does he address why the Torah chooses to exemplify ethical and moral behavior specifically through stories. However, his comments may allude to something modern scientific literature is beginning to uncover.

Neuroscientists are now learning that our brains seem to be uniquely adapted to making sense of experiences through stories. As opposed to learning rational facts or statistics which only activate the language centers of our brains, stories allow for the activation of the emotional centers of our brains as well. This is critical because, contrary to popular belief, it is not our rational, linguistic brain that has the most influence on decision making. Rather, studies confirm that our emotional brains make the decisions, and we utilize the linguistic, rational parts of our brain to justify those decisions.[8] This is also why storytelling has been found to be more impactful than expressing statistics or pure facts when it comes to convincing others of something.

Perhaps this is why the Torah chooses to impart the lessons of ethical character through the medium of stories. Unlike most other *mitzvot*, which are primarily behavioral and dependent on clear-cut criteria, the development and expression of positive character traits are largely dependent on one's internal emotional world. The best way to tap into one's emotional world, studies show, is through stories. To encourage compassion, for example, it may be ineffective to simply be told to be compassionate, or informed of statistics about compassionate individuals. Learning about Abraham's passionate plea with God to save the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, on the other hand, may be a more effective method. And similarly, we learn an equal amount from the stories of Tanakh on how *not* to behave as well. A serious discussion about the story of David and Bathsheba can invite students to contemplate the concepts of power, vulnerability, and modesty, to name a few. In addition to utilizing the stories of Tanakh, schools should take advantage of the compelling stories taught within their English literature classes and the

[7] For more on how stories teach ethics, see Dr. Shira Weiss' article here.

[8] See Antoine Bechara, Hanna Damasio, Antonio R. Damasio, "Emotion, Decision Making and the Orbitofrontal Cortex," *Cerebral Cortex* 10, no. 3 (2000): 295–307; and Rupa Gupta, Timothy R. Koscik, Antoine Bechara, and Daniel Tranel, "The Amygdala and Decision-Making," *Neuropsychologia* 49, no. 4 (2011): 760-766.

plethora of stories that take place in current events as a means towards teaching and thinking critically about character development.

Conclusion

We have discussed three approaches to the question of why the Torah may not contain an explicit *mitzvah* of character development. These approaches are not mutually exclusive, and all are supported by psychological and educational research. Each approach offers practical steps to improve our current character development curricula in our schools.

With any approach, the first important step is to increase the quantity of time dedicated to character development. R. Vital's approach that character development is the foundation of all the *mitzvot* implies that character development should have an increased role in our educational system. It should not be relegated to a "pep talk" that occurs a few times a year, but rather should be incorporated into even a diverse range of subjects. Improving character and social-emotional skills will, research shows, improve one's academic performance as well.

Our schools may also want to consider character development through the natural lens that R. Kook championed. Empowering our students to engage in ethical behavior has also been shown to be more effective than character education through compulsion. An emphasis on rewards, rather than punishments, can transform the school's environment and engender in our students an intrinsic motivation to develop their character. Lastly, the approach derived from R. Berlin's comments in Genesis speaks to the importance of tapping into our students' emotional worlds by teaching through compelling stories.

Both our traditional Jewish wisdom and contemporary psychological research emphasize the importance of character development in education. It's time to listen to, and implement, that advice.[9]

Managing Editor:
Yisroel Ben-Porat

Editors:
David Fried
Davida Kollmar
Yosef Lindell
Chaya Sara Oppenheim
Tzvi Sinensky
Miriam Zami

Consulting Editors:
Miriam Krupka Berger
Elli Fischer
Miriam Gedwiser
Chaim Saiman
Jeffrey Saks
Jacob J. Schacter
Sara Tillinger Wolkenfeld
Shlomo Zuckier

Please contact us at editors@thelehrhaus.com

[9] I would like to thank Miriam Zami from the Lehrhaus for her editorial help as well as Rabbi Dr. Mordechai Schiffman, Yehuda Fogel, Rabbi Effie Wagner, and Rabbi Mayer Simcha Stromer for helping me flesh out the ideas of this essay.