

2021: The Year of the Mensch

Parashat Shemot

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What's it all for? What's all this really all about? All these laws, rituals, details, minutia; 613 *mitzvot*; hundreds of customs, *minhagim*, practices, holidays, fast days, feast days; all kinds of parameters that touch every aspect of our lives, both public and private. What's it all for??

Have you ever asked that question? Ever as a rabbi, a teacher, a parent? Ever ask yourself? I know a lot of bar/bat mitzvah kids have wondered about that...I'm not sure if Matthew has, but I wouldn't be surprised. I want to say that unlike some other religions where questions like that would be considered a cardinal sin, in Judaism it's okay, no it's praiseworthy to contemplate the meaning of all of this...

This question was once posed by one of Judaism's greatest religious leaders, teachers, ethical voices, thinkers in Jewish history, the great Rabbi Israel Slant, who lived from 1809-1883 and founded the Musar Movement, a religious approach to ethical development and cultivating personal values for self-improvement. Like many rabbis, Rabbi Israel Salanter both asked and answered his own question. He said: The Torah came to make a mensch. The Torah came to make a mensch. In other words everything we do, every ritual, every prayer, every mitzvah, every practice is all ultimately for the purpose of making us into mensches. Judaism is training in the art of menschlichkeit.

Let's just pause for a hot sec, as my kids say, and define those words. Mensch is a Yiddish word that derives from German. In the original German a mensch is simply a human being, a man to be more specific. But Yiddish took it to a different level...a mensch is not just a human being, but a human being, as Rabbi Yitz Greenberg says, "of good character—ethical, caring, not ego driven to stand out but motivated to be kind and helpful to others. This human would relate to God and therefore be humble and aware of their limitations. This person would be inner-directed—connected to people but not needing to curry favor at the cost of principles or values. [All of] The Torah's stories, commandments, wisdom, instructions, and ways of living all were intended to nurture a good human being with reverence for god, for fellow human beings, and for live itself."¹ In Hebrew, the word for mensch is *ish*, again, not just a homo sapien; this not a biological term, an ish is a person of character and substance. And who is the paradigmatic *ish* or mensch in Judaism? What individual in the Torah exhibits the essential qualities and characteristics of menschlichkeit, of being an ish? None other than Moses.

Where does this idea come from? Take a look at Exodus 2:12. Moses sees an Egyptian beating the heck out of an Israelite slave. Moses is horrified; he can't believe the brutality he is witnessing. The Torah then says: *Va'yifen ko va'cho*, Moses looks this way and that way, *vayar ki ain ish*, the way this is usually translated is that he saw that there was no one around. *Vayach*

¹ Greenberg, Rav Yitz. "The Torah Came to Make a Mensch," Divrei Torah by Rabbi Yitz Greenberg, Machon Hadar

et ha'mitzri, then he intervened, physically, knocking the Egyptian to the ground. I want to suggest a slightly different reading of this verse. When the Torah says *Vayar ki ain ish*, I think it's highly unlikely that Moses looked around and saw no one around. Just a few verses earlier Moses is described as *vayeitzei el eichav*, wandering about amongst his kinsmen, observing their backbreaking labors. How is it possible that a slave and an Egyptian all of a sudden find themselves alone with no one around. Rather, when Moses looks *ko va'cho*, here and there, it's not that he doesn't see anyone, it's that he doesn't see an *ish*, he doesn't see a *mensch*. Instead he sees people ignoring this abuse, keeping their heads down in the mud and straw, pretending that they don't notice this egregious beating. So seeing that there were no *menschen*, no people of character or decency who were going to do something to stop this, Moses himself intervenes to rescue the victim. This led to the great Rabbi Hillel teaching about 1,500 years later in Pirkei Avot (2:6): *Be'makom she'ein anashim, hishtadel li'hiyot ish*, in a place where there are no *mensches*, you must strive to be a *mensch*. Strive to be like Moses. Don't say someone else will step up or speak up. Don't ignore moral crises because you think you're not worthy or you can't make a difference. A true *mensch* can't ignore situations that require humanity, compassion, or justice.

Listen to this true story:

It took place in Munich in Nazi Germany. A woman was riding the bus home from work when SS storm troopers suddenly stopped the bus, boarded, and began demanding to see everyone's identification papers. Most were annoyed by the delay in their ride home, but a few were completely terrified. Jews were being told to get off the bus and get into a truck parked around the corner. The woman watched from her seat near the back of the bus as the soldiers systematically worked their way down the aisle. She began to tremble, tears started streaming down her face. The man sitting next to her noticed that she was visibly shaken and asked her why. "I don't have the papers you have. I am a Jew, and they are going to arrest me." The man exploded with disgust and began to scream and curse at her. "You stupid idiot," he shouted, "I can't stand to even sit next to you right now!" Noticing the commotion the SS soldiers asked what all the yelling was about. "I can't believe this woman" the man shouted angrily. "My wife again went out without her papers! I am so fed up with her. She always does this!" The soldiers chuckled and moved on. The woman never saw him again. She never even knew his name. But she lived to tell the story.

What an incredible example of being a *mensch*, of taking a risk, like Moses did, to protect another human being. This German passenger could have ignored the terrified Jewish woman, changed his seat, even turned her in. But instead he saved her life.

There have been a lot of parenting books written about how to raise good kids, bright kids, worldly kids. Even Jewish parenting books about how to raise a *mensch*. And while I am sure they all have merit, I think we need look no further than the Torah, and this parasha in particular for the key features of how to aspire to be a *mensch*.

The first criterion that I glean from the parasha is that a *mensch* is someone who truly respects other people, regardless of whether those other people are themselves *mensches* or not! Moses

had no idea who this Israelite was who was being beaten by the Egyptian. They weren't friends, or relatives; they probably had never seen each other. What Moses reacts to is the essential humanity of the Israelite. A mensch sees every person as worthy of respect and consideration, a does whatever possible offer help and assistance.

Another significant quality of a mensch that is so pervasive in Moses is the awareness that they are not perfect. Nobody acknowledges their frailties or imperfections more than Moses. It even borders on low self-esteem. I don't speak well; no one will believe me; I don't have what it takes to be the defender of the Jewish people; maybe you should ask someone else...Moses thinks of every excuse in the book, and God says, no! I want you! I want you not only because of your imperfections, but because you are aware of your imperfections. You see, it's easy to use our limitations as an excuse to not really do anything special or significant. I couldn't possibly do that; now fill in the blanks: you don't have the right degree, you don't have the experience, you're not smart enough, strong enough, old enough, tall enough, talented enough...But God says, I am happy you know that you're not perfect. And now that we've gotten that out of the way let's proceed to what you can accomplish anyway! A mensch is not perfect. A mensch knows he or she is not perfect, and that awareness stimulates them to do more and to be more than some might expect.²

I read an article in *Psychology Today*,³ in which Dr. Saul Levine, a Jewish therapist was trying to describe in modern, psychological terms, what it is to be a mensch. He said, a mensch is a person who leaves a "positive emotional footprint." I love that formulation. A mensch is the kind of person who leaves a positive emotional footprint on our lives. And that could be a spouse or parent, a grandparent, or child, a co-worker or friend. Moses's unfailing concern for the women at the well who he cared for in Exodus 2:27 (one of them would become his wife, Tzipora), or his father-in-law Yitro who he loves and respects are among the many people who are imprinted with Moses's positive emotional footprint. Think about the people in your life who have left a positive emotional footprints...they are the true mensches.

Our society has suffered from a rather flagrant lack of menschlichkeit lately. It is my prayer that this year, 2021 will be the year of the mensch. Leo Rosten, the great Yiddish writer says that a mensch is "someone to admire and emulate," boy do we need more of those in our world. The good news is that we can all be mensches, by respecting and caring for all people, by taking risks for other people, by acknowledging our own imperfections, and by making positive emotional footprints on others' lives. Rabbi Salanter, who said that "the Torah came to make a mensch," also once said: "At first I tried to change the world and failed. Then I tried to change my city, and failed. Then I tried to change my family, and failed. Finally, I tried to change myself and then I was able to change the world." This year, I hope we will all change the world, starting first with ourselves, one mensch at a time.⁴

² Lamm, Norman. "Menschlichkeit," *Derashot Le'Dorot*, pp. 15-20

³ Levine, Saul, MD. *Who Is, and Who Is Not, a "Mensch"?* <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/our-emotional-footprint/201708/who-is-and-who-is-not-mensch>

⁴ Hammerman, Rabbi Joshua. "The Year Of The Mensch," *New York Jewish Week*, March 26, 2019