

The Importance of Character*
Parashat Ki Tissa
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Rabbi Carl M. Perkins
Temple Aliyah, Needham

Stubbornness can be a virtue. Obstinacy rarely is.

In today's *parasha*, we're introduced to the character trait of obstinacy and its consequences.

Moses is a little late in coming down the mountain with the Ten Commandments—and the people lose it. They can't restrain themselves, and they do all sorts of forbidden things: They commission Aaron to build a golden calf. They sing and dance around it in improper ways. They actually *worship* the golden calf as if it—rather than God—brought them out of the land of Egypt.

God hears about it and is understandably furious, and he tells Moses that he's had it with the people.

But what he says is very curious: "I've had it," he says, "for I see that this is a *stiff-necked people*." *That*, it seems, is the basis for God's judgment. Not the specific sins the people have committed, but the fact that they were "stiff-necked."

What does it mean to be stiff-necked? The image comes from farming: when an ox or other beast of burden stiffens its neck, it's hard to turn it in any particular direction. Now, we might find stubbornness *annoying*, but could it be that it is so grave a sin as to be the basis of the people's punishment?

Rabbi Nosson Tzvi Finkel (the Alter of Slabodka, 1849-1927) puts it this way: The Israelites commit the sin of idolatry and yet God is punishing them for ... their *stubbornness*?!

"From here we see," says Finkel, "that a defect in character is even worse than a defect in action—more serious even than a grave sin like idolatry."

* Many thanks to Rabbi Shai Held, whose *dvar torah*, "The Importance of Character" (Mechon Hadar, Adar I 5774) inspired this sermon.

A transgression, he explains, can be a slip, a mistake. What you do today, you may not do tomorrow. But a *character flaw* is far more insidious: it alters who we are at the deepest level and the divine image in us is damaged in the process.” (quoted in Shai Held, “The Importance of Character”)

Now, obviously, all of us know that character is important. But Finkel’s thesis is awfully strong. It may seem not only odd, but even not particularly *Jewish*, to interpret the Bible to support the notion that character is so important, so *consequential*.

After all, we’ve probably had it drummed into us that the essential concern of Judaism is our behavior. “*Lo ha-midrash ha-ikkar, elah ha-ma’aseh*.” It isn’t our learning as much as what we *do* that counts. Many of us have been weaned on the notion that, in contrast to Christianity, which is a religion of **creed**, Judaism is a religion of **deed**.

And so it may seem not only *incorrect* but *wrong* and even *improper* to put so much emphasis on the qualities of character.

But Finkel has upon whom to rely.

None other an authority than Maimonides, the great medieval thinker, agrees. He insists that character is central to the religious life.

The Bible teaches us that we are supposed to “walk in God’s ways.” It doesn’t explain what that means, but that’s what it tells us we’re supposed to do. Maimonides, in *Sefer HaMitzvot*, a work that reviews the 613 *mitzvot*, is clear: He tells us that walking in God’s ways includes both concrete actions (“good deeds”) and character traits (“fine attributes”). (See *Sefer HaMitzvot*, Positive Commandments, #8.)

This is consistent with the rabbinic teaching on this notion. There are two rabbinic interpretations of the mitzvah to “walk in God’s ways.” Interestingly—and, I’d argue, significantly—both can be found in our *siddurim*. The first, not surprisingly, tells us that we should take concrete steps: “As God clothes the naked, so you, too, should clothe the naked, etc.”[†]

[†] BT Sotah 14a; note, however, that although the text only cites specific actions, the text refers to “following the attributes (*middot*) of the Holy One.” This text (and the following one) can be found in *Siddur Sim Shalom* for Shabbat and Festivals, p. 69.

But the second interpretation focuses more on cultivating inner qualities: “As God is called merciful, so should you be merciful, etc.”[‡]

Taken together, these support Maimonides. If we want to become more like God, we have to try not only to *act* like God (by doing godly things), but we have to try to *be* like God (by developing refined personalities).[§]

Yes, the *mitzvot* are important. We should all, of course, seek to fulfill *mitzvot*. But the cultivation of our *middot*, our moral qualities, are also essential. There is an entire genre of Jewish literature focused on character development that we should explore and review.

I once knew a parent who used to respond to his kids’ losing control by saying, “DP.” DP stood for, “Develop Patience!”

Indeed, developing patience is something we should all seek to do—not only when we’re young, but all the time.

And so it is with many moral qualities, such as the one alluded to in our *parashah*.

The Talmud asks: Why are Torah scrolls written with a quill? The answer—or one answer that is given—is that they are flexible. “We should always,” the text continues, “seek to be flexible like the reed, and not stiff like the cedar.”^{**}

Or so says the Talmud. Yes, to be stubborn, in pursuing truth, justice, or peace—yes, *that* can be virtuous. There’s a place for stubbornness.

But obstinacy is another thing altogether.

‡ Midrash Sifrei Eikev 49. See Siddur Sim Shalom for Shabbat and Festivals, p. 69.

§ In his recent dvar torah on this subject, Professor Shai Held of Mechon Hadar brings to our attention a fascinating evolution in Maimonides’ thinking. Whereas in his Sefer HaMitzvot, Maimonides sees both proper behavior and proper character as expressions of the *mitzvah* to imitate God, by the time that Maimonides wrote the Mishneh Torah, he had altered his understanding of the relationship between the two. In the Mishneh Torah, he understands the obligation to walk in God’s ways to refer exclusively to the *mitzvah* to develop character. (Mishneh Torah, Hilkhhot De’ot 1:6) What then of good behavior? Maimonides interprets this obligation to flow from the obligation to “love your neighbor as yourself.” (M.T., Hilkhhot Eivel 14:1)

** BT Taanit 20a.

What's the difference between them?

One way to look at it is to ask "To what end?" To what end is someone being stubborn? Is it to further his or her own interests? Is it to justify him or herself? Is it to preserve his own sense of well-being at the expense of another?

Or is it to do what is right *for the sake of doing what is right*; for the good of *others* or for the good of the *community*—even to one's own detriment.

It isn't always easy to distinguish them, but in this case, one sounds like obstinacy; the other like stubbornness.

The take-away is simple: Yes, it's important to behave according to the prescriptions of our tradition. But that's not enough. If we want to imbibe the full message of our tradition, it's to seek not only to **do** the right thing, but to **be** the right kind of person.

We should strive to develop the qualities described in the passage I quoted earlier:

As God is called merciful, so too should we be merciful.

As God is called gracious, so too should we be called gracious.

And let's add another trait: Just as God's Torah is written with a flexible instrument, so too should we seek to cultivate flexibility—in thought, word, and deed.

Shabbat shalom.