

The Ideal

That Judaism is the Science of Human Perfection was already established by Jewish philosophers in ancient times. It is by no means a “religion” in the accepted sense of the term, merely some particular mode of worship or the obligation to perform specific laws and commandments. Instead, its purpose is to train and refine the human personality. Hence, it encompasses all of life: it designs patterns of belief and ideas; it formulates its own outlook on, and defines the underlying principles of, life; it describes character traits and propensities; it delineates behavior patterns and thought processes; and it defines the boundaries of law and statute. “Turn it and turn it over again, since all is comprehended in it.”¹ In its totality,

¹ Avot 5.

Judaism serves as the ladder to raise man to the highest limits of his perfectibility.

This basic element, human perfection, spans all sections of the Torah, from the Pentateuch and Prophetic Books to the orally-transmitted tradition, and constitutes its “final cause.” As for the Written Torah, even an initial, cursory survey will suffice to reveal that the positive and negative commandments do not occupy its major portion. Only specific sections deal with these topics, while the rest are no more than the expression of an all-embracing outlook on life and the world from which emerges the principles governing the perfection of man. For the most part, the Torah consists of narratives, beginning with Creation, continuing with the history and development of the ensuing generations – of the Flood, the Tower of Babel, etc. – followed by accounts of the salient features in the lives of the Patriarchs, all of which together make up the content of the Book of Genesis. Next to be recounted are the Exodus and the Giving of the Torah and the continuation of the chain of events – up to and including the initial wars and conquest of the eastern regions of *Eretz Yisrael*. Only certain sections deal with laws. It must then be obvious to every intelligent believer that these narratives cannot be mere allegories or chronicles of past events, devoid of all enduring value.

Very characteristically, the Torah expresses itself with the greatest economy and with the utmost precision in the legal portions, to the extent that “heaps upon heaps of *halachot* are deduced from every single letter and tittle.” Single sentences in the Torah have been expanded into complete Talmudic tractates, and basic laws have been deduced from allusions and hints of allusions. Essential laws hang in the air suspended by a Scriptural “hair” as the Mishnah puts it: “The laws concerning the dissolution of vows hover in the air and have nothing to rest on. The Sabbath, Festival Offerings, and Misappropriation Laws are as mountains hanging by a hair, for they have scant Scriptural reference but consist of many halachic details.”² In its narrative portion, by contrast, the Torah displays extreme extravagance, indulging in lengthy descriptions, relating incidents with lavish detail, and recording conversations verbatim.

A case in point is the story of Eliezer, the slave of Abraham.³ The Torah recounts every detail of his conduct: his standing at the well, his intentions and actions, his feeding the camels, how he and his party washed their feet,

² *Chagiga* 10a.

³ Genesis 24.

and the minutest particulars of his discussion with Laban and Bethuel, which would seem to be quite inconsequential. Taking note of this fact, the Sages of the Talmud came to the conclusion: "The mere conversation of the slaves of the Patriarchs' household is more important than the Torah of their descendants. The chapter dealing with Eliezer covers two or three columns, and his conversation is not only recorded but repeated." Or, in even sharper language: "The washing of the feet of the slaves of the Patriarchs is more important than the laws of their descendants, to the extent that even their washing their feet must be recorded while the ritual defilement of a reptile, an integral part of the Torah, is only deduced by an amplifying reference in Scripture."⁴

It follows, then, that these very narratives – the histories of the various generations, the development of the human race, and all the details of the conduct of the first men on earth – must possess major significance in that they purport to teach the Jewish conception of life and, through the leading personalities, all the elements in human conduct essential to human perfection. The Torah narratives constitute the spiritual crucible for the refinement of the world and man and the foundation upon which the entire

⁴ *Bereishit Rabba*, *ibid.*

Torah and all aspects of law and action rest.⁵ These stories are the vehicle for exposing and conveying all man's experiences. Diverse human types pass in review before us with all the minutiae of their spiritual make-up. They are to furnish the eternal examples of, and guides for, good and bad. On the one hand they portray the noblest of human qualities – the image of G-d in man and the acme of human perfection, which was reached by the ancient Patriarchs, the spiritual giants among men – and simultaneously, the narratives expose the evil inclinations working in the heart of man, his deceitful plottings, and the lowest levels of corruption and depravity, as personified in the villains, the exponents of evil and violence, and in the behavior patterns of Sodom and Amalek.

The narratives depict man's struggle against temptation, his wrestling with the evil inclination, as exemplified by the generation of the Exodus which rose to the very pinnacle of exaltation and merited the witnessing

⁵ See the Rabbinic dicta which indicate that the histories of the generations serve as an introduction to the Torah, as it is said (*Vayikra Rabba* 15): "To keep the way (*derech*) to the tree of life" – "*derech*" refers to *derech erez*, lit. "the way of the world," i.e., polite behavior; afterwards follows "the tree of life," which refers to Torah. (Also *Yalkut Shim'oni*, Genesis 3.) See also Exodus 24: "And he took the book of the covenant and read it in the hearing of the people," Rashi, ad loc.: "From Genesis until the Giving of the Torah."

of signs and miracles and the sight of the living G-d but then, in the next moment, plummeted to the very depths – as compared with its own former stature – and succumbed to the temptation of the Golden Calf and to all manner of rebelliousness and strife. Here is revealed the watchful eye of Providence, the Divine punishments evoked by the willful acts of individuals and generations – from the iniquities of the generations of the Flood and the Tower of Babel to the sins of the intelligent Generation of the Desert to the slightest blemish in the character of an Adam or a Moses. These narratives hold a moral mirror up to every man in which he can discern what underlies his own personality, the sources stirring his own soul. From every single incident and motion he may learn a lesson in the understanding of the world and man, thereby gaining a comprehensive view of the ways of life in the sense that “the deeds of the fathers provide a sign for the children.”

Nor are these lessons the mere expression of attitudes and views. They are binding rules: *halachot* pertaining to belief and opinion, to virtue, to refined behavior and ethical conduct, which are by no means secondary in importance to the rest of the laws. Moreover, these lessons possess the greater importance since they constitute the general principles of the Torah, the fundamentals governing human conduct, which serve as the basic motives in all human

action, and upon them the entire system of law and action is dependent.⁶ Just as “heaps upon heaps of *halachot*” are inferred from every letter and tittle of the legal portions of the Torah, so similarly should “heaps and heaps” of *halachot* be deduced from every letter and tittle of the Scriptural narratives. From them, too, should all the basic views and conceptions of Judaism be deduced, and a complete “*Shulchan Aruch*” of human behavior patterns be compiled.

Obviously, then, the Torah does not consist exclusively of laws and precepts as the generally accepted, superficial view maintains, but instead, essentially, of a system of character refinement which embraces all of man and life. Not only the Biblical narratives, but a great number of the *mitzvot*, both positive and negative, both those pertaining to relationships between man and G-d as well as those pertaining to relationships between man and man, have as their purpose to teach a person how to live and perfect himself. These are the general *mitzvot*. Unlike the particular precepts, they do not involve the performance of

⁶ See R. Chaim Vital, *Sha'are Kedushah* (part 1, gate 2): “Character traits provide the principal preparation for the 613 commandments, whether in regards to observing or transgressing them. Hence, the possession of evil traits is very, very much worse than the transgressions themselves.... One must avoid evil traits more conscientiously than observe the commandments, both positive and negative.”

any single act or the fulfillment of any particular function. They include all-embracing general principles which take in the entire thought and idea complex of man and his entire pattern of conduct.

Let the positive commandment “And you shall love your neighbor as yourself”⁷ serve as an example. Essentially this commandment seems no more than a “duty of the heart,” an emotional attitude, yet it impinges upon almost all of man’s ways and deeds, to the extent that it is hardly possible to take a step in human life without encountering this obligation. Not for nothing do our Sages define it as “a great principle of the Torah.”⁸ Similarly, the positive commandment “And you shall walk in His ways,”⁹ which requires man to imitate his Creator in virtue and action: “As He is compassionate, so you be compassionate; as He is gracious, so you be gracious; as He performs acts of *chesed*, so you perform acts of *chesed*,” etc.¹⁰ The *mitzvah* consists of a single injunction – and yet it pervades all of human nature

⁷ Leviticus 19.

⁸ *Sifra*, *ibid.*; also *Shabbat* 31a.

⁹ Deuteronomy 28.

¹⁰ *Sifre*, Deuteronomy 11; cf. Rashi, *ad loc.*, v. 22; Maimonides, *Book of the Divine Commandments*, *mitzvah* 9.

and points the direction for all human action and progress in life.

The same applies to all *mitzvot* pertaining to spiritual qualities: the knowledge of G-d, the fear and love of G-d, serving G-d with one's heart, clinging to Him; or the admonitions against vices: covetousness, hatred, jealousy, harboring grudges, pride, etc. These obligations set the pattern for all men's thoughts and deeds, and are to serve as the wellspring for all his actions. Taken together they constitute the essential portion of the Torah, as Scripture itself asserts: "And now Israel what does the L-rd, your G-d, require of you, but to fear the L-rd, your G-d, to walk in all His ways, and to love Him, and to serve the L-rd your G-d with all your heart and with all your soul, to keep the commandments of the L-rd, your G-d, and His statutes."¹¹ The Torah enumerates such *mitzvot* as are virtues first, and only afterwards does it mention the necessity of performing the individual *mitzvah* acts. Furthermore, even the *mitzvot* that require bodily action as such are directed toward the refinement of the person performing them. The final goal is not the act *per se*, but the intentions and thoughts that go with it, the tremor that the deed transmits to the soul, the personality change it effects.

¹¹ Deuteronomy 10.

Of course, it must be stated emphatically that the Torah is after all a Torah of deeds and actions. Thoughts and ideas are not sufficient. The Torah demands deed. It ordains the performance of a variety of *mitzvot*. Man cannot fulfill his obligation other than by specific acts, including all their details and minutiae. Here lies the basic distinction between the Jewish Torah and other doctrines. The latter promulgated values and ideals alone. Elevated and noble we may concede them to be, they remain removed from the realm of action and find no realization in actual life. In contradistinction, the Torah concretizes every idea in action, clothes every thought with deed. It is a fundamental Torah principle that “study is not the important factor, but the deed.”¹²

Nevertheless, in Judaism, too, the ultimate goal is not the actual performance of the deed itself. Instead, as has been stated, in the conception of Judaism, the ultimate goal is the refinement of man – the refinement of his outlook and the refinement of his personality. Man is not at all evaluated in terms of his deeds, but in accordance with the level of perfection he has attained, as Scripture avers: “And

¹² *Avot* 1.

G-d looks to the heart,"¹³ or, in the words of the Sages: "The Allmerciful requires the heart."¹⁴ Deeds constitute the means for the achievement of refinement, and human perfection cannot be attained except through their agency. The deeds form the roots which promote growth, the heightening of human stature. Hence, "anyone whose deeds exceed his wisdom resembles a tree with many roots but few branches."¹⁵ Deeds – by their very nature – constitute the principal educational factors which implant within the character of man the refinement and virtue which constitute his perfection. Well has an author stated: "Just as a white-hot iron becomes strengthened by contact with cold water, so is thought reinforced by action. Action causes the thought it evokes to penetrate to the heart and to become firmly ingrained in the human personality." Nevertheless, the final goal to which all actions are directed is this perfection of the human personality.

Now, just as the performance of *mitzvot* produces its positive effects, so in turn do sinful acts impress their negative effects upon the human spirit, breaching its

¹³ | Samuel 16.

¹⁴ *Sanhedrin* 106b.

¹⁵ *Avot* 3.

defenses, impairing its purity and innocence. Refraining from such transgressions is the armor protecting the integrity of the spirit. At times, even abstention itself, the subduing of the inclination, the exercise of self-control serves to educate and to guide.

It follows, then, that the practical positive and negative commandments of the Torah are the ways and means for the achievement of human perfection.¹⁶

¹⁶ See, Saadiah Gaon, *Book of Beliefs and Opinions* (treatise 5): “Our Master, exalted and magnified be He, has made it known to us that when the instances of obedience on the part of His servants predominate, they are accorded unto them as merits, whereas when those of disobedience predominate, they are accounted as demerits.... Moreover, these activities of men leave their traces upon the latter’s souls, rendering them pure or sullied.... Thereupon I realized that when the merits predominate in the soul, the latter is thereby purified and rendered luminous.... On the other hand, when the demerits are in the majority in it, the soul becomes turbid and darkened” (tr. Rosenblatt).

R. Joseph Albo writes in a similar vein (*Sefer Ha’Ikkarim*, Treatise III, chap. 27): “All the commandments of the Torah, whether positive or negative, are a means to the attainment of human perfection” (JPS ed.). So, too, R. Moses Chaim Luzzato in his *Derech Ad-nai* (part II, chap. 2): “Good deeds bring about the materialization in body and soul of a perfect and exalted existence, while, as opposed to them, evil deeds the materialization of ugliness and deficiency.” See also his *Path of the Just* (chap. 1), where he writes that the performance of *mitzvot* and the service of G-d “are the means that draw us to the authentic perfection.” See also the “*Perush*” on Maimonides’ *Book of Knowledge* (Laws of the Fundamental Principles of the

Torah, 2:1): “All the commandments were given for the exclusive purpose that through them we should attain this stage,” i.e., the love of G-d.

Indeed, this is the view of the Sages: “ ‘The word of G-d is pure...’ (Ps. 118). Said Rav: The precepts were only given in order that man might be refined by them. For what does the Holy One, blessed be He, care whether a man slaughters an animal by the throat or by the nape of its neck? Hence, its purpose is to refine man” (*Bereishit Rabba* 44, *Tanchuma*, *Shemini*). This, too, is the intent of their remarks: “Sin dulls the heart of man, as it is said: ‘Neither shall you make yourselves unclean with them’ (Leviticus 11) – read not ‘*venitmetem*’ (defiled) but ‘*unetamotem*’ (dull-hearted)” (*Yoma* 39a); “ ‘And My commandments shall you keep and do them’ (*otam*) (Leviticus 26) – i.e., you shall make *yourselves* (reading ‘*atem*’ for ‘*otam*’). It is as if you made yourselves” (*Vayikra Rabba* 35). Cf. Rashba (*Ein Ya’acov, Sukkah*, Vilna ed.) who deals with this question at length and expresses a different view.

