# Moral Development and *Tikkun Olam*

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*Tikkun Olam* literally the repair of the world, or more broadly, the improvement of the world, is a central Jewish ethical concept and imperative. The classical texts of the Jewish tradition offer a values orientation that stresses our responsibility to make the world a better place and suggests ways to do so. But how do we convey this wisdom to youngsters in a way that will become internalized?

In 1994, CAJE and The Washington Institute for Jewish Leadership and Values co-published a curriculum entitled Jewish Civics: A Tikkun Olam/WorId Repair Manual. Now in its second edition, with a separate teacher's guide, the curriculum examines key social and political issues that have been the focus of the American Jewish community's energy over the past decades. It features a Jewish values matrix which provides a systematic approach to values-based decision- making, related primarily to how Jews engage in important contemporary public issues. We have been gratified to find our 38-point matrix adapted and utilized in settings for children, teens, college and young leadership training programs for adults.

The curriculum became the centerpiece for a Jewish Civics Initiative (JCI), co-sponsored by The Washington Institute and the Jewish Education Service of North America. Fifteen communities now participate in this program designed for high school-aged students (mostly eleventh and twelfth graders). It involves studying the Jewish civics curriculum, attending a JCI retreat in Washington D.C., and then participating in a community service project based in the home community. The service projects have ranged from literacy projects for inner city children, to intercultural dialogue projects, to ongoing volunteering in homeless shelters and soup kitchens.

## A RATIONALE FOR ENGAGEMENT

When we were approached by the Jim Joseph Foundation to revise the curriculum, making it suitable for a Jewish day school audience, we began to wrestle with how best to make the case for the engagement of Jews in the world around them. In particular, given that the primary audience for the new curriculum would be Orthodox day schools, we wanted to make the case for Jewish civic involvement in public issues that went beyond the borders of the Jewish community. How could we best convey the notion that the principle of íé÷åìà îìö (tzelem elokim) (created in the image of God) applied to both Jews and non-Jews? How could we transmit the understanding that support for Jews and Jewish causes and working with other religious and ethnic groups were not mutually exclusive?

To make that case, we needed to frame the moral imperative for social engagement in light of concepts directly rooted in Torah sources. This is not so simple. Classical Jewish tradition has no conceptual framework for political activism. There is no key term in rabbinic or biblical Hebrew for civics or politics. These are Greek concepts. Instead, Jewish traditional sources tend to see the primary arena of social exchange as taking place between individuals. To arrive at the desired role that an individual might play vis-a-vis society, one must extrapolate from the duties and obligations incumbent on individuals in the realm of

interpersonal relations. Thus Jewish social and political engagement becomes an extension of the rabbinic understanding of what it means to be a moral person.

The strategy that we developed to connect Jewish personal behavior with Jewish civic behavior was an adaptation of Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of moral development. Kohlberg's theory helps us to understand how it is that people move through a ladder of moral stages which drive our behavior. Kohlberg's stages, in ascending order of sophistication, are:

1. fear of punishment
2. self-interest
3. self-image
4. duty
5. social contract
6. absolute justice and kindness

## APPLYING KOHLBERG'S LADDER TO JEWISH CIVIC RESPONSIBILITY

For several reasons this approach recommended itself to us as a way to challenge students to think about their responsibilities to themselves, to the Jewish community and to the world at large. First, properly presented, it is non-judgmental. A person who is motivated to ethical behavior because it positively impacts on their self-image is not a worse person than a person who understands how his/her behavior contributes to the common good (social contract). At the same time, by showing how one might engage in certain moral behaviors at a higher level of the ladder, a person can be motivated to increasingly altruistic behavior.

Second, it became clear to us that the study of Jewish texts was, in itself, a yardstick that revealed a certain place in the moral continuum on the part of the reader. So many texts can be understood on several levels of Kohlberg's ladder. The very discussion of those texts in a class was a way of creating a cross-stage conversation among peers that helped everyone to grow to their next level of development. All of Kohlberg's levels are represented in one form or another in Torah and rabbinic passages. Kohlberg argues that individuals grow from one stage to the next by being exposed to the next level of argument. What better way to have people grow morally than by considering classical Jewish texts!

We began to look for texts that suggested one or more of Kohlberg's stages of moral development. What emerged was a recasting of Kohlberg's ladder in a Jewish key, although we modified it to include a seventh level, above the level of absolute justice and kindness *kiddush Hashem*--actions that grow out of the most selfless form of religious devotion.

## THE MORAL DEVELOPMENT GRID

What follows is the grid we created for our new curriculum,*Jews, Judaism and Civic Responsibility*(1998)

## JEWISH MORAL DEVELOPMENT GRID

Level One: Fear of Punishment. At the most elemental stage, children do what their parents tell them, simply

because of concern for negative consequences. Everyone's moral system rests on an intuitive sense that there are rewards and punishments. In, (Jewish law) the consequences for transgressing every (negative commandment) are specified in the Gemara, based on the relevant Torah passages. The obvious problem with this stage is that, in the absence of any threat of punishment, there is no guarantee or even likelihood that the individual will be able to overcome his *yetzer hara* (evil inclination) and do what is right.

Level Two: Self-Interest. For children, this is the motivation born out of desire for a reward. On a more sophisticated level, it is the expectation of any personal benefit that may come of doing what is right. This extends to the recognition that other people also have needs and expectations, and that the right thing often involves making deals and equal exchanges. Doing what is right out of worry for *Gehinom* is boosted to the next level with the faith that *tzadikim* will see their rewards in and the world to come. To be sure, the Mishna says (Do not be like servants who serve their master only to receive a reward). This means that as a motivation to do what is right, the hope for reward is necessary but not sufficient.

Level Three:Self-Image. This is teaching by *midot* character qualities, which is stressed in elementary school. *Midot* such as truthfulness, zeal kindness¬ diligence, *derekh eretz*, common sense decency¬ and respect represent a list of all the things a good person should be or strive to embody. We could meaningfully say to a person at this stage, "A ben/bat Torah does not do such a thing." At this level, the principle of "What is hateful to you, do not do unto others" applies. The individual still sees him or herself as the basis of criteria for doing what is right, but is beginning to generalize to other people. Personal loyalties and fulfilling expectations are important. The insufficiency of this stage comes when decide we must between two conflicting positive *midot*. For example, should we be an, a person of truth, or an a person of peace, in a given situation? *Midot* lists alone don't help us to decide.

Level Four:Duty. A sense of belonging to a group (*Yeshivishe*, *hasidishe*, or Religious Zionist) and a feeling of obligation to follow the *halakha* simply because it says so characterizes this level. A person holding at this point feels a sense of responsibility for the larger social system and asks himself, "If I don't do what is right (avoid cheating on tests, contribute my time to a hesed project), who will?" He recognizes and defers to a higher authority than himself. Clearly, this is a great virtue, and many people never make it to this level. But it fails to provide direction in cases where the *halakha* is not specified or where there is an apparent conflict between best interests of the roup and what the *halakha* seems to require, when we would say "It is time to act for God; turn over the Torah.".

Level Five:Social Contract. The greatest good for the greatest number is the criterion for this position. Most public policy statements issued by the government take cognizance of "the national interest" to justify any new law, program or official position. Issues of rights, principles, and values that underlie society become important determinants. Concepts such as going "beyond the letter of the law" or not being a "a vile person who acts within the bounds of the law" require a generalized understanding of the principles of the halakha. The difficulty comes in not always being able to determine what is the greatest good for the greatest number or resolving a conflict between group/national interest and higher principles of justice, kindness, or respect for human life.

Level Six:Absolute Values. The first five levels determine what is right by seeing how such good an action accomplishes, either for the individual or for the group. Level six is not concerned with utility. It demands,

doing the right thing for its own sake and not for the sake of any advantage that might accrue. Right is determined by universal Torah principles. Especially in issues between man and man, cases are decided according to either of the two most fundamental principles--justice and kindness. These two principles are irreducible and exist in dialectical tension with each other. At this level, the value of human life is absolute, an end in itself and never a means to an end.

Level Seven:Sanctification of God's Name. Based on the notion that man is created in God's image, doing what is right is a matter of trying to anticipate what HaShem would want in a given situation, not merely out of deference to authority Level Four but out of a love and a sense of attachment for the Holy One "Even as He is merciful, so you should be merciful." Compassion or justice come from imitating HaShem out of love. At this highest and most difficult to attain level, the difference between good and evil begins to dissolve when viewed from the perspective of the Eternal and when the overriding consideration is the will of God.

## PUTTING THE GRID INTO PRACTICE

A few words about application of this grid: Because the focus of our programs is on promoting *tikkun olam*, social activism and civic engagement, we use the Jewish moral development grid to think about and analyze public policy issues. For example, we might ask a class to discuss the position taken by the Jewish community on affirmative action programs using the grid. What becomes clear is that at Level Two, Jews opposing affirmative action programs have a clear sense that it does not serve the Jewish community's self-interest because we are over-represented in colleges, graduate programs and professional schools, as well as in choice vocations. At the same time, Jews with a sense of social utility or social contract will be much more favorably disposed to programs that provide disadvantaged minorities with opportunities that they would not otherwise have.

Another example. What should be the Jewish community's position be on accusations made against the government of Israel about the human rights treatment of Palestinians? There are those who make the case that the media and human rights monitoring organizations exercise a double standard, accusing Israel of behavior that is often hidden from the public eye in Arab countries. On the other hand, there are Jewish groups that feel that Israel needs to be held up to the highest standards of the Jewish tradition regardless of the behavior of neighboring countries or perceived threats that might otherwise justify harsher treatment of Palestinians suspected of bringing harm to Israeli civilians. This too is a discussion that is enriched when placed in the context of our Jewish moral development grid. It would not be hard to apply the same grid to look at other types of behavior that might be more in the realm of personal decision-making and interpersonal relationships.

Finally, the Jewish moral development grid can be a useful tool in the study of Jewish texts. For students to be challenged to speculate about the moral level that a commentator addresses when writing a particular passage or interpreting a biblical verse opens up a way for students to begin to have a more nuanced understanding of the exegetical process. It is thus possible to give students a glimpse of the most altruistic possibilities framed by the Jewish tradition and then challenge them to live up to them.

Teachers interested in the curricula should contact The Washington Institute for Jewish Leadership and Values at 301-770-5070.

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