

*Moral Intuition and Jewish Ethics*¹

By: ANTHONY KNOFF

Introduction

Our generation is currently witnessing acts of terrorism around the world, performed in the name of God. Movements that define and present themselves as devoted to God have expressed that devotion through a deadly violence that is antithetical to Godliness.

In the face of this enormous *hillul Hashem*,² it is incumbent upon the Orthodox Jewish community to look inwards and ask whether we are succeeding in expressing the lofty ethical values of Torah in our own lives, schools and communities.

Far less extreme than Islamic terrorism, though still of great relevance to our concern, are the scandals in significant number that have been exposed in Orthodox Jewish communities.³ These cases provide the impetus and perhaps the imperative for the Orthodox community to ask whether sufficient focus has been given to ethical development as an essential and fundamental component of Torah life.⁴ Indeed, the laxity of

¹ The author wishes to thank Dr. Tom Angier, Rabbi Jack Bieler and Rabbi Binjamin Zimmerman for their comments on a version of this article.

² For an account of Rabbi Yehuda Amital's designation of the 9/11 atrocities as *Hillul Hashem*, see Yonatan Shai Freedman, "Stories Rav Amital Told; Stories of Rav Amital," <http://www.haretzion.org/component/content/article?id=114:hessed-yonatan-freedman> (2010).

³ There are, of course, major dissimilarities between terrorism and scandals but the common denominator is the *hillul Hashem* which obscures the fundamental relationship between Godliness and ethics.

⁴ For an explanation of some recent scandals in terms of a lack of sensitivity to Jewish ethical values, see Marc Shapiro, "Responses to Comments and Elaborations of Previous Posts III," <http://seforim.blogspot.com/2009/09/marc-b-shapiro-responses-to-comments.html>.

For a stimulating and instructive discussion of the capacity of a communal attitudinal climate to affect individual behaviour, see Joshua Berman, "Collective Responsibility and the Sin of Achan," *Radical Responsibility: Celebrating the Thought of Chief Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks*, ed. Michael J. Harris, Daniel Rynhold and

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many Jews with regard to ethical imperatives, when contrasted with their scrupulousness in adhering to ritual requirements, was already noted in the 19th century by Rabbi Yisrael Salanter:

[I]n our districts injunctions against consuming [unkosher food] have become innate in the Jewish soul... But in our great iniquity the contrary is true in commercial relations. When their business dealings possibly entail thievery and extortion, most men will not be concerned prior to being sued, and there are some among them who, even after being sued, will employ deceitful devices or will be arrogant.⁵

To be sure, these deficiencies must not be exaggerated and there are many outstanding ethical features of the contemporary Orthodox community.⁶ Nevertheless, our eternal mandate and the challenges of our generation demand that we not sit on our laurels. We must constantly be seeking to improve our community's conduct with regard to *menschlichkeit* and *middot* development (as well as, it goes without saying, other areas of Torah living). This article is a modest submission toward that end.

In addressing this salient practical issue, I begin, perhaps unexpectedly, with a classic philosophical question regarding the relationship between Divine law and ethical intuition. A careful analysis of the approach to this question presented in Torah sources warrants the conclusion that ethics lies at the heart of Torah life but in a way that is not limited to

Tamra Wright (Maggid Books, 2012), chapter 3. Rabbi Berman argues that if even a single individual commits an infraction that is informed by a collective attitudinal climate, the whole that created that climate should be held accountable.

For discussions of how the lack of attention paid to ethics and character has manifested itself in other ways in the Orthodox community, see Rabbi Yitzchak Adlerstein, Symposium: "The Sea Change in American Orthodox Judaism," *Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought*, Vol. 32, No. 4 (Summer 1998), p. 22; Jonathan Rosenblum, "Dr. Middos is Not Just for Kids," <http://www.cross-currents.com/archives/2011/08/03/dr-middos-is-not-just-for-kids/>; Rabbi Ilan Feldman, "Why the Giant Sleeps," *The Klal Perspectives Journal*, (December 2012); Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein, *By His Light: Character and Values in the Service of God*, ed. Rabbi Reuven Ziegler (Ktav Publishing House, 2003), pp. 17–19

⁵ Quoted in Hillel Goldberg, *Israel Salanter* (New York: Ktav, 1982), p.78.

⁶ For reference to a range of academic articles documenting the high standards of marital commitment, charitable giving and resistance to alcoholism and drug abuse in the Orthodox community, see Lawrence Keleman, *Permission to Receive: Four Rational Approaches to the Torah's Divine Origin* (Targum, 1996), pp. 127–142, 148–157.