

"DOES IT PAY TO BE GOOD?"

"Does it pay to be good?" is a question one often hears -- and asks -- as a sign of frustration. Usually, it is just an expression of momentary disappointment, and serves a cathartic function. But sometimes, and with some people, and especially if repeated often enough, it is elevated from a query of complaint to a philosophy of life, and from a passing mood to a firm moral judgment. So let us ask ourselves the question rather seriously: does it pay to be good?

We must first divide the question into two parts, by posing a counter-question: "pay" for whom?

"Does it pay to be good?" may refer to the benefactor, to the one asking the question; or it may refer to the beneficiary, the one who is the recipient of my goodness and generosity.

The first question -- does it pay for me to be good -- probably should be answered, for most cases, in the negative. If you expect dividends from your ethical investments, you are seriously in error. The good life is not necessarily the happy life. John Kennedy, born into a wealthy family, high society, and catapulted into historic political prominence, decided that "life isn't fair." Much earlier, the Rabbis broodingly concluded that *לויף לאף יאזא אים צו ער*, that the reward for virtue simply is not in evidence in this world. For myself, I am professionally engaged a good part of the time in doing favors for people, and arranging for some people to be kind to others. I long, long ago learned that one thing I must never expect (if I wanted to lead a life free from constant minor disappointments) is -- gratitude. I now never expect anyone to show gratitude. Therefore, when, as often happens, I meet people who are possessed of that noble virtue, I am delighted beyond words at the great discovery of -- a genuine human being. But ingratitude neither overwhelms me nor supprises me any longer because, truth to tell, and without the least trace of cynicism, it is the rule rather than the exception. Were a person to be good only because it pays, or because it will be recognized and acknowledged, he would have to stop being good!

But essentially the question does not even deserve an answer for, no matter what the answer may be, our immediate reaction must be to ask: "so what?" Who says that it has to pay in the first place? He who plans to be a moral individual because it pays to be good, will end up either as an evil person or as one who will suffer constant frustration. Judaism taught us

אל תהיו כעבדים המשרתים את הרה אל מנה עקב פה

do not be like servants who serve the master, or employees who work for the "boss," only in order to receive a salary or a wage. Don't be good merely because it pays. Judaism never urged upon us that old maxim: "honesty is the best policy." A Jew must be honest even when it is not a good policy. Morals and goodness are matters of principle, not prudence. Yes, we believe that ultimately there is spiritual reward; but this must never become the motive for being good in the first place.

The real question that is worth pondering is the second one: Does it pay to be good for the beneficiary of my kindness? At first glance, it is a simple matter of definition: obviously it is good for someone if I do him good. Yet it is not that quite simple. We must consider such factors as excess, timing, and short-term indulgence which may lead to long-term damage. And here, there can be no uniform answer. Here, what is required is wisdom and maturity and deliberation in order to foretell whether our benefaction will ultimately prove helpful or harmful.

The incident of Moses and the מרגלים, the spies he sent into Canaan, provides an illustration of a case where it did not pay to be good. God told Moses

שלח לך אנשים ויחזו את ארץ כנען  
send for yourself people to spy out the land of Canaan. But according to the way the Rabbis (Talmud Sotah, cited by Rashi) interpreted this incident, the relations between God, Israel, and Moses were quite complex, and the role of Moses was anomalous. Thus Rashi states:

פירש רש"י: אלו אנשי חובה ששלח משה, ואלו אנשי חובה ששלח ה'...  
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God said to Moses, send a delegation of spies if you wish. But do it on your own responsibility. For Myself, I am not commanding you to do so. For the Israelites themselves demanded such a delegation, and when Moses consulted the divine Presence, He replied: but I have already told them that it is a good land? Therefore, if you wish you may let them have their spies, but not without great risk...

In other words, the sending of the spies was a concession, like the permission to appoint a king over themselves (R. Bachya) or the eating of meat to the children of Noah, or the law of ושלח רש"י. And, while we may be grateful to God for being an understanding Father, it is not always clear that such indulgence is for our own ultimate good.

Obviously, here Moses was being too good. He submitted to pressure by the Israelites, when perhaps he should not have done so. He was too good -- and it didn't pay!

The commentators are undecided about the moral qualities of these spies. Some say they were *אֱשֵׁרִים* (truly just), some say *אֲשֵׁרִים* (merely innocent), and some say they were *אֲשֵׁרִים* (wicked). But I prefer a fourth interpretation, that of Midrash Tanhuma, which declares them *אֲשֵׁרִים* -- a word which means both knaves and fools, primarily the latter. The spies were immature and childish. And Moses over-indulged them, pampered them and babied them, like a father who is too good to his little children.

In Deuteronomy, Moses, in recollecting the story of the spies, said: *וַיִּשְׁמַע יְהוָה בְּקוֹלִי*, which usually is explained as, "and the plan found favor in my eyes." But if Moses admitted that the plan was valid in his opinion, how does Rashi tell us here that Moses did not really want to do so, and that he consulted with the divine Presence which discouraged him? I submit that, perhaps, the expression of *וַיִּשְׁמַע יְהוָה בְּקוֹלִי* means, in essence: I consider the matter and decided to be good to you. And of course -- he erred. For to be good is not always the same as to do good. It is sometimes better to be hard-headed than soft-hearted.

Indeed, Moses already knew the harm that can come from excessive softness. After the sin of the Golden Calf, when Moses acts as the great advocate and defendant of his people, he tries to shift part of the blame for the making of the calf -- on God Himself! He maintains that God helped to spoil this people.

Moses said to the Almighty: O God, the gold and the silver which You gave them to excess (when they left Egypt and crossed the Red Sea), so much that they had to exclaim, "enough!" -- that is what caused them to make a golden calf; You spoiled them and led them to think that such material valuables are a true criterion of greatness, and so they deified them!

So, all of us must learn in our personal and professional and especially family lives: it does not always pay to be good. Sometimes we intend to be kind and generous, and are only inviting trouble later on for the very one whom, out of love, we seek to benefit.

We tend to sin in this respect especially as parents. It is an old Jewish syndrome of which the Bible records numerous

examples: Eli with his sons, Samuel with his sons, David with his sons. In our days, we often try to give our children what we did not have, and so we fail to give them what we did have. Our generation of affluence is overpressing material goods on the younger generation, and thereby denying them a sense of discovery, of self-worth, of the achievement of earning and deserving the goods of the world. We think אנחנו נותן להם, we are being good to them, when really we are really helping them build אברהם יצחק, a golden calf. We send teens on a trip around the world; later there is nothing for them to look forward to other than ennui and boredom. We saturate them with luxuries until they are sated and cry כֵּן, "enough!" What else is there left for them to live for, especially since non-material values were never seriously considered? We send our children to the best universities with only the minimal attention to Jewishness, Jewish society, and the opportunity for Jewish observance. And later, even the finest Orthodox families wonder where they went wrong and why they now suffer from the problems of inter-marriage.

But this idea of short-term kindness leading to eventual harm, has to do not only with individuals but applies to collectivities as well.

One such case is the problem of the priorities that our liberal Jewish community sets for itself. We are generally a kindly people, and therefore concerned with the well-being of all peoples. And that is as it should be. But we have sinned in the area of priorities. We have tried to be good to others and denied our kindness from our kin. We have acted politically, socially, and economically on behalf of all the underprivileged -- except for the Jewish poor; on behalf of all political causes -- except our own; on behalf of all marginal people -- except for those of our own people who have not yet "made it." And so it did not pay for us or for them to be good.

A second such instance concerns the hijackings which now proliferate in the world. The policy of most governments has been to be soft, accommodating, and gentle with hijackers. Most nations told themselves, obviously in sincerity, that they were protecting the passengers on the immediate plane endangered. Yet they failed to see that in this way they were inviting further hijackings and endangering the lives of untold numbers of other, future passengers. Apparently, only the government of Israel took the right attitude: no concessions, no submissions, no negotiations. They realized that it does not pay -- even for the passengers of an endangered jet -- to submit to the criminals.



In this respect, I wish to single out for special condemnation and censure a recent editorial that was distinguished by viciousness and innanity rolled into one. A week or ten days ago, The New York Times, in an editorial after the Lydda massacre, had the temerity and audacity to suggest that Israel itself must accept part of the blame, because when it decided to storm the Sabena jet some time earlier, this provoked the terrorists to attempt the Lydda massacre.

What unmitigated gall! While the Times was pontificating in its editorial columns, its news columns were informing us that the Lydda massacre had been planned long before the Sabena jet incident. Now we know, factually, that this was the case. Furthermore, this week the airline pilots of the world set June 19th as a deadline for a new policy against hijackers -- one much more in consonance with that of the State of Israel -- and that they will strike if this policy is not worked out.

Perhaps it is a consolation for us to recall that The New York Times was usually wrong on Israel, from the beginnings of the Zionist movement until this very day. Thank the Lord that, with all our reverence for the sage advice given to us from the Olympian heights of the Times editorial room, we have been wise enough to disregard it and ignore it. Perhaps it is a measure of the justice and rightness of Israel's cause that it evoked the displeasure of the Times editorial writer. When we satisfy the Times' standards, perhaps then we ought to question whether we are on the right track.

To summarize, we respond to the question, "does it pay to be good?" as follows: if the question is asked whether it pays for me to do good, the question is invalid, it is a pseudo-question because it really makes no difference what the answer is. It is irrelevant. I do not do good because it pays, but because as a Jew I am commanded.

But if it means: does it pay to be good toward the beneficiary?, the answer is that it depends upon him, upon his maturity and sense of proportion, upon his absorptive capacity for kindness and goodness. It is a question which demands wisdom and knowledge of the particular case in order to know how to act properly.

For, as we indicated, it is so very difficult to know when we are truly doing good and when we are going to excess, that even God was faulted by Moses in this respect. Yet, we must always rely upon Him and pray that He be good to us without overindulging us and causing us eventual harm. So we pray, in the blessing of Rosh Chodesh, *אשר נתת לנו חיים ושלום*, give us life in which the

desires of our hearts will be fulfilled -- but not all of them,  
not everything we want, not without measure, but only:  $\eta \rho \iota \sigma \tau$ ,  
for what is truly our real good.  $\eta \delta \sigma \mid \mu \iota \epsilon$ .