

# Middot: A Stairway of Virtues

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# Contents

Preface .....	5
A Brief History of the Musar Movement .....	7
1. Humility. <i>Anavah</i> .....	11
2. Repentance. <i>T'shuvah</i> .....	17
3. Friendship. <i>Yedidut</i> .....	25
4. Common Decency. <i>Derekh Eretz</i> .....	31
5. Keeping Commitments. <i>Hithayevut</i> .....	35
6. Lovingkindness. <i>Gemilut <u>H</u>asadim</i> .....	39
7. Hospitality. <i>Hakhnasat <u>O</u>rhim</i> .....	43
8. Leadership. <i>Hanhagah</i> .....	47
9. Charity. <i>Tzedakah</i> .....	53
10. Peace. <i>Shalom</i> .....	57
11. A Good Name. <i>Shem Tov</i> .....	61
12. Honor. <i>Kavod</i> .....	65
13. Wealth. <i>Osher</i> .....	69
14. Taking Care of the Body. <i>Shmirat ha-Guf</i> .....	73
15. Compassion. <i>Rahamim</i> .....	77
16. Slow to Anger. <i>Erekh Apayim</i> .....	81
17. Truthfulness. <i>Emet</i> .....	85
18. Not Coveting. <i>Lo Tahmod</i> .....	89
19. Using Good Words. <i>Leshon ha-Tov</i> .....	93

20. Work/Industriousness. <i>Melakhah</i> . . . . .	97
21. Not Embarrassing. <i>Lo Levayesh</i> . . . . .	101
22. Being Pleasant. <i>Sayver Panim Yafot</i> . . . . .	105
23. Reverence for God. <i>Yirat ha-El</i> . . . . .	109
24. Attentiveness. <i>Shemiat ha-Ozen</i> . . . . .	113
25. Trustworthiness. <i>Emunah</i> . . . . .	117
Glossary of Sources . . . . .	123

# Preface

The Hebrew word *middot*, from the Hebrew verb *madad* (to measure), has a number of related meanings. Rabbinic thinkers employed the term to describe people's types, temperaments, characteristics and dispositions. The term also refers to a collection of virtues that are intended to provide people with moral guidance for daily living. A virtuous person is called a *baal middot*, one who possesses good qualities. In *Ethics of the Fathers* two types of people are defined. "Whoever possesses generosity, humility and modesty is the disciple of our ancestor Abraham. Those who belong to the followers of wicked Balaam, however, possess an evil eye, a haughty spirit and excessive desire" (*Pirke Avot* 5.22).

This sourcebook of Jewish virtues is intended to allow students to explore the practical wisdom that has informed Jewish piety throughout the centuries. This sourcebook includes a brief introduction to the genre of literature known as *musar*. This is followed by a presentation of twenty-five *middot*. Each moral virtue is accompanied by two entries from a traditional Jewish source. Follow-up questions allow the reader further opportunity to grapple with the meaning of the sources and other issues related to the *middah* under discussion.

I hope that this book will help students improve their understanding of ethical behavior and moral living. May these Jewish values guide them to live in a way that truly reflects God's image and to be the good and kind people that Judaism most values.



# A Brief History of the Musar Movement

There is no comprehensive concept in the Bible that parallels the modern concept of ethics. The first rabbinic listing of Jewish virtues is found in *Pirke Avot* 6.6. In *Pirke Avot* we are taught that the Torah is acquired through forty-eight virtues. The most notable virtues on the list are awe, fear, humility, patience, trust and generosity. During the medieval period the Hebrew term *musar* gradually acquired the connotation of moral principles and virtues that tend to improve the relationship between one person and another.

Yekhiel ben Yekutiel ben Binayamin ha-Rofe (late thirteenth century) was the author of an anthology entitled *Sefer Maalot ha-Middot* (*The Book of Choicest Virtues*). This anthology was the first in a new genre of literature, one that dealt with the analytic treatment of important Jewish virtues. Yekhiel taught each spiritual value and virtue by citing excerpts from the Bible and rabbinic literature. In order to define the virtues more graphically, he also categorized many vices that were antithetical to the virtues.

Written in the late twelfth century by Rabbi Yehuda Ha-Hasid, the ethical work *Sefer Hasidim* contains a rich variety of ethical and moral principles. The following is an example. “Call the attention of a non-Jew to an error he has made in overpaying you, for it is better that you live on charity than that you disgrace the Jewish name.”

Rabbi Moses ben Nahman, called Ramban, represented the emotional, feeling side of Jewish ethics. In his famous *Iggeret Musar (Letter of Instruction)*, which he wrote from the Holy Land shortly before he died in 1270, he told his son Nachman, “Learn to speak gently to all persons at all times. Regard every person as greater than yourself. When you address a person, do not keep staring in his face.”

Rabbi Yehuda ibn Kalaaz, who lived in Algeria in the sixteenth century, wrote in his *Sefer ha-Musar*, “Reverence for God is the thread upon which the various good qualities of people are strung like pearls. When this string is severed, the pearls scatter in all directions and are lost one by one.”

*Orhot ha-Tzadikim (The Ways of the Righteous)* is another book about virtues, published in Yiddish about five hundred years ago. Since the sixteenth century it has been printed in nearly eighty editions. Some of its major sections are devoted to pride, modesty, love, compassion, zeal, truth and repentance.

The fourteenth century ethical work *Menorat ha-Ma'or* is a summation of all phases of Jewish life. From this book a Jew learns the things he or she must do to be a true friend. “Be first to greet your fellow human being; invite him to your joyful occasions, call him by complimentary names; do not give away his secrets.”



A movement known as the “*musar* movement” attempted to educate people about strict ethical behavior in the spirit of Jewish law. The movement was founded in the nineteenth century by Rabbi Israel Salanter, and he set up special houses for the study of Jewish ethics. He taught, “The sensual desire in man often makes him mistake momentary pleasure for the true happiness he craves, and he succumbs to the pressure of his passion. Frequent yielding to his sensual desires finally produces in man an impure spirit—the decay of his spiritual energy—with the result that he becomes a slave to his evil habits. We must train ourselves so that we no longer obey the ethical teachings reluctantly but follow them quite naturally.”

Finally, Israel Meir Ha-Kohen, a nineteenth-century sage best known for his book *Hafetz Hayim* (*Desiring Life*), has been described as one of the moral geniuses of the Polish and Russian Jews. This saintly scholar discusses at length such misdemeanors as slander: “Those who listen to slanderous gossip are just as guilty as the talebearers. Repeated use of the evil tongue is like a silk thread made strong by hundreds of strands.”

All of these teachers of ethics and virtues would likely agree that there is no rest for the good person, who must always strive to do better, to perfect the world and to increase righteousness. Such a person is likely to be humble, reliable, dependable, honest, unselfish, gracious, kind, compassionate and always sensitive to the feelings of others. The Yiddish word *mensch* aptly describes such a person—one who loves, respects and is devoted to his fellow human beings. A *mensch* will always look beyond the letter of the law to its spirit, living fully as a person who reflects God’s truest image.

“*My lowliness is my exaltedness.*” (Midrash, *Exodus Rabbah* 45.5)



# 1. Humility— Anavah

Moses, Judaism's greatest prophet, is described as being the humblest of men. "Moses was a very humble man, more than all the people that were upon the face of the earth" (*Numbers* 12,3). Other famous Jews also valued humility. Abraham, considered the father of the Jewish people, says, "I have taken upon myself to speak to God, I who am but dust and ashes" (*Genesis* 18.27). And the prophet Micah states, "God has told you what is good, and what God requires of you to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with your God" (*Micah* 6.8).

The ancient rabbis compare the Torah, God's greatest gift to people, to water. "Just as water flows downward, so the Torah that comes from on high flows only into the minds and hearts of the humble."

Rabbinic thinkers often warn people not to indulge in pride and arrogance. They assert that it is not enough to walk the moderate path of humility. Rather, they advise people to tend toward extreme modesty and even meekness in order to avoid being arrogant.

In Judaism meekness has been understood to mean gentleness to all people in both word and deed. It was wise King Solomon who once said, "And he that is of a low spirit shall attain honor" (*Proverbs* 29.23).

## From Our Tradition

# The Dispute of Hillel and Shammai

The following Talmudic tale deals with the historic rivalry between the followers of the sage Hillel and those of his contemporary Shammai. The school of Hillel usually interpreted the law in a liberal and lenient way, while the school of Shammai almost always held a strict, narrow line. Ultimately the school of Hillel triumphed, and its interpretations became the accepted standard of law.

For three years the school of Shammai argued with the school of Hillel.

The school of Shammai said, “The law agrees with our views.”

And the school of Hillel said, “The law agrees with our views.”

Then a Divine voice announced, “Both of these opinions are each the words of the living God.

But the law follows the rulings of the school of Hillel.”

Why did the law follow the rulings of the school of Hillel if both schools’ rulings are the words of the living God?

Because the followers of Hillel were kind and modest.

They not only studied the rulings of the school of Shammai, but even quoted these rulings before their own.

This teaches that whoever acts humbly, the Holy Blessed One raises up, and whoever acts exalted, the Holy Blessed One humbles.

From the person who seeks greatness, greatness flees. But the person who flees from greatness, greatness follows

(Talmud, *Eruvin* 13b).

## Judge Levi bar Sissi

This tale, found in the *Genesis Rabbah*, concerns the unusual behavior of Judge Levi bar Sissi when the citizens of Simonia asked him to answer three questions.

When Rabbi Judah passed through the city of Simonia, the townspeople asked him to appoint a judge and teacher for them. He selected Levi bar Sissi. The people built a platform for bar Sissi to stand on when addressing them. But when they approached him with their questions, he found that he could no longer remember the answers. Troubled by this unusual problem, bar Sissi arose early in the morning and went to see Rabbi Judah. When Rabbi Judah saw bar Sissi, he asked, “What have the people of Simonia done?”

Levi bar Sissi answered, “They posed three questions to me, but I was unable to remember the answers. Then they repeated the questions, and I answered them correctly.”

“If you know the answers,” Rabbi Judah said, “then why did you not give them immediately upon being asked?”

Levi bar Sissi replied, “They put me on a platform and a tall chair. My spirit became conscious of the honor and the answers departed from me.”

“Let this serve as an example to all,” said Rabbi Judah. “When a person fills himself with pride, wisdom escapes him” (*Genesis Rabbah* 81).

## Questions

1. Have you ever had a competition with a classmate? Is it possible to stay humble during any competition? Do you agree with the statement in Talmud *Eruvin* 13, “From the person who seeks greatness, greatness flees. But the person who flees from greatness, greatness follows”? Can you cite an example of this statement?
2. *Genesis Rabbah* 81 says, “When people fill themselves with pride, wisdom escapes them.” Can you think of an experience that bears out the truth of this statement? How do you think wisdom and pride are related?
3. According to the *Orhot Tzaddikim* (chapter 2), “The test of humility is one’s attitude toward one’s subordinates.” What do you think is meant by this statement? What is your relationship to your subordinates?
4. Moses, considered by some the greatest prophet ever to have lived, raises a series of objections to God before he accepts his mission. Three of his objections follow. Read them, and decide whether his objections are in any way related to his humbleness. Can too much humility be counterproductive to good leadership?

**First Objection:** After God has told Moses that he is the one who will be sent to Pharaoh to free the Israelites, Moses says, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and free the Israelites from Egypt?” (Exodus 2.11)

**Second Objection:** In Exodus 3.18 Moses is told by God, “The people will listen to you.”

Moses demurs and says, “What if they do not believe me, and do not listen to me?” (Exodus 4.1)

**Third Objection:** Moses says to God, “Please, God, I have never been a man of words. I am slow of speech and slow of tongue.” (Exodus 4.10)

5. Throughout their day, Hasidim often use humility meditations to remind them of the importance of this trait. One such meditation is “Dust you are, and unto dust you shall return” (Genesis 3.19). If you were to choose a verse to use for a similar purpose, which one might it be?
6. Do you think that Moses was truly the humblest person on the face of the earth (Numbers 12.3)? Who gets your vote for the most humble person?
7. According to the Hasidic sage Rabbi Sim<sup>h</sup>a Bunim, all people should have two pockets so they can reach into one or the other, according to their needs. In the right pocket people should carry the words, “For my sake the world was created,” and in the left, “I am earth and ashes.” What would you advise putting into pockets?
8. According to the Talmud (*Bava Metzia* 23b), a scholar is permitted to declare that he is unfamiliar with a tractate of the Mishnah when asked a particular question. What do you think is the reason for this? How does it relate to our present topic?





## 2. Repentance— T'shuvah

Great is repentance, because for the sake of the one who truly repents, the whole world is pardoned.

(Talmud, *Yoma* 86b)

Most Jews are most likely to associate repentance with the High Holy Days of Rosh ha-Shanah and Yom Kippur. The ten day period from the start of the New Year until the end of Yom Kippur is known as *asoret yemai t'shuvah*, the Ten Days of Repentance. However, attendance at synagogue during these days, even if accompanied by genuine repentance, only wins forgiveness for offenses committed against God. As the Talmud teaches, “The Day of Atonement atones for sins against God, not for sins against man, unless the injured party has been appeased” (*Mishnah, Yoma* 8.9).

In truth, the opportunity for *t'shuvah* (repentance) is not restricted to any specific time. It is always available and is an ongoing process. The Hebrew term for repentance, *t'shuvah*, literally means “to return,” or “to change direction.” In Judaism, repentance is not enough to make up for a transgression. You must do something of a diametrically opposed nature. You can't just feel sorry and quit performing the bad deed. You must do something to make up for it. Thus, Jewish repentance requires a concerted effort on the part of the transgressor to break with the past, do an about-face and perform better actions.

The great medieval philosopher Moses Maimonides devotes ten chapters to repentance in his work the *Mishnah Torah*. Defining different grades of repentance, he offers this illustration.

“If an opportunity presents itself for repeating an offense, and the offender, while *able* to commit the offense, nevertheless refrains from doing so because the offender is penitent but not out of fear or failure of energy, this is repentance. If, however, a person only repents in old age, at a time when that person is no longer capable of doing what s/he used to do, this is not an excellent mode of repentance; but it is acceptable.”

According to Maimonides, even if one transgressed all one's life and only repented on the day of one's death, one's transgressions are pardoned.

Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus said, “Repent one day before your death.”

His students asked him, “How is it possible for a person to repent one day before his death, since a person does not know when he shall die?”

He replied, “All the more reason is there that a person should repent every day, lest he die the next day. Thus, all his days will be days of repentance”

(Talmud, *Avot de Rabbi Natan* 15).

If you integrate repentance into your daily routine, *Pirke Avot* suggests that your entire life will become part of the process of personal change.

## From Our Tradition

# The Story of the Meat Seller

This Talmudic tale attempts to illustrate the meaning of true repentance and to show how a person may be sure that another has repented.

It was discovered that a certain meat vendor sold unfit meat. Rav Nahman took away the man's license and disqualified him as a kosher slaughterer. As a sign of penitence, the man let his hair and beard grow and gave the appearance of doing repentance. Rav Nahman was ready to restore his vendor's license to him, but Rabba said, "He may be a hypocrite. How shall we truly know when to grant him our confidence again?"

Rabbi Iddi ben Abin suggested, "When he goes to a place where he is unknown and demonstrates that a mitzvah is more important to him than money, either by returning something which he has found or by condemning as unkosher valuable meat that belongs to him." (Talmud, *Sanhedrin* 25a)

## Eleazar ben Dordia

This Talmudic tale attempts to teach us that true repentance must come from our heart and soul, and we cannot ask others to intercede on our behalf.

It was told that Eleazar ben Dordia was a devotee of prostitutes. Once, when he heard that a certain prostitute lived near the sea, he took his purse filled with *dinars*, and he crossed seven rivers in order to reach her. When he was with her, she exhaled and said to him,

“Just as I have blown out the air that will never return, so you Eleazar ben Dordia will never be given forgiveness for your sins.”

Eleazar went out and sat between two hills and said, “Hills, beg for kindness for me.”

“How can we pray for you?” they answered. “We stand in need of compassion for ourselves, for it is written, ‘For the mountains may move and the hills be shaken’” (*Isaiah 54.10*).

“Heaven and earth,” he cried out, “you plead for kindness for me!”

“How can we pray for you?” they retorted. “We stand in need of compassion for ourselves, as it is said, ‘The heavens shall melt away like smoke, and the earth wear out like clothing’” (*Isaiah 51.16*).

“Sun and moon,” he shouted, “you plead for me!”

“How can we intercede for you?” they answered. “We stand in need of compassion for ourselves, as it is said, ‘Then the moon shall be ashamed and the sun shall be humiliated’” (*Isaiah 24.23*).

“Stars and planets,” Eleazar called out, “you plead for me.”

“How can we?” they answered. “We also need mercy for ourselves, as it is written, ‘All the heavenly hosts shall mold’” (*Isaiah 34.4*).

“Then,” he said, “This matter solely depends on me.” He put his head between his knees and cried aloud until his soul left him.

Just then a *bat kol* (heavenly voice) was heard saying, “Rabbi Eleazar ben Dordia is destined for the world to come.”

When Rabbi Judah the Prince heard this, he cried and said, “There are those who attain the world to come after many years, and some in just one hour!” He also said, “Penitents are not only accepted, they are even called ‘Rabbi’” (Talmud, *Avodah Zarah* 17a).

## Questions

1. In the story of the meat vendor in Talmud *Sanhedrin* 25a, the question is how to know whether one who seems to have repented has truly done so. What is your litmus test for determining true repentance?
2. What is the moral of the Eleazar ben Dordia story? What do we learn from it about the meaning of true repentance?
3. According to Rav Naḥman of Bratslav, there are three requisites for repentance: seeing eyes, hearing ears, and an understanding heart that is ready to return and be healed. Let your eyes see your conduct, let your ears hear words of criticism and let your heart understand its eternal purpose. Then you will attain perfect repentance. What are your standards for repentance? Is there, in your opinion, such a thing as “perfect repentance”?
4. According to *Sefer Hasidim*, the most admirable kind of repentance takes place when a strong, vigorous person subdues an overwhelming urge, rather than when a person incapable of action fails to act on an urge. What is your opinion of this *Sefer Hasidim* text? In your opinion, what is the most admirable kind of repentance?

5. In his *Gates of Repentance*, Jonah Gerondi wrote that the repentant sinner should strive to do good deeds with the same faculties or parts of the body with which he or she sinned. Thus, if one's feet ran to sin, they should now run to perform good deeds. If one's mouth spoke falsehoods, it should now speak wisdom. Hands that were violent should now open in charity. What are your thoughts about Gerondi's advice? Which parts of the body are most likely to get a person into trouble?
6. *Pirke Avot* 2.1 states that when a person thinks about three things, he or she will be able to overcome the desire to sin. "Know what is above, a seeing eye, an ear that hears and a book in which all your actions are recorded." In the space provided, write your own modern version of things that will help overcome one's desire to sin.

**Modern Version.** A person can overcome the desire to sin when \_\_\_\_\_

7. Rabbi Meir said that when one truly repents, the entire world is pardoned (Talmud, *Yoma* 86b). What do you think Rabbi Meir meant by this statement?
8. In the last few years people have been faxing requests for God's intervention to the Western Wall. People in the Hasidic world are also asking for forgiveness by e-mail. The e-mails and faxes are placed on the grave of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Menachem Mendel Schneerson. How do you feel about people sending e-mails and faxes to ask for forgiveness? How do you feel about the use of the telephone to ask for forgiveness?
9. The Talmud *Yoma* 86b asks, "How can one prove that one is truly penitent? Rabbi Judah said, 'If an opportunity to commit the same sin presents itself on two occasions and

one does not yield to it.” How would you answer the same question?

10. According to Rabbi Moshe Teitelbaum, you should turn your mind to repentance before you pray, before studying Torah and before eating. What do you think are the best times to turn your mind toward repentance?
11. Rabbi Elijah deVidas advised people to make some sort of alteration to their food and drink and to their clothing in order to remember to do *t'shuvah* each and every day. For example, he suggested that one week a person ought not eat fruit, another week not eat hot food, and so on. What are your thoughts about this suggestion? How would you advise a person to remember to do daily *t'shuvah*?





# 3. Friendship— Yedidut

“Get yourself a companion” (*Pirke Avot* 1.6).

“...Get yourself a companion,” advised Joshua ben Perakhya. People often have many acquaintances, but there are few people who have more than one or two good friends.

Jonathan and David’s model friendship in the Bible (in the first book of Samuel) is held in high esteem. What makes their friendship especially remarkable is that these two men had competitive interests. Jonathan was the oldest son of King Saul and heir apparent to the throne. David, King Saul’s leading soldier, was the people’s choice to be the future king. Yet their potential competition never stood in the way of their friendship. David’s gift of leadership only increased Jonathan’s desire to be the top aide in his friend’s future kingdom. “You are going to be king over Israel and I shall be second to you” (*I Samuel* 23.17).

You are no doubt beginning to feel the pressures. Having a close friend or two can go a long way to alleviate some of the stresses and frustrations. Since friendships such as David and Jonathan’s are rather unusual, Judaism urges you to be very careful when choosing your friends.

## From Our Tradition

# Three Friends

This tale, adapted from *Pirke de Rabbi Eleazar*, an eight-century midrashic work, tells the story of an extremely agitated person who needs friendship for comfort and the extent to which each of his friends would help him.

A man had three friends. One friend he loved very much, the second he loved as well. The third friend was regarded with less affection. Once the king commanded this man to appear before him. He was extremely agitated, wondering what the king might have in mind. With fear and trepidation the person called upon each of his three friends to accompany him to his meeting with the king.

First he turned to his most beloved friend and was extremely disappointed that this friend was unable to attend his meeting with the king.

When he turned to his second friend, the friend replied that he would go with him, but only so far as the gates of the palace and no further.

Finally, and with a touch of desperation, he turned to the friend to whom he had been the least devoted. The third friend said, “I will not only go with you before the king, but I will plead your case as well.”

Who is the first friend? It is wealth and material things that one must leave behind when one departs this world, as it is written, “Riches profit not in the day of reckoning” (Proverbs 11.4).

Who is the second friend? It is one's relatives, who can only follow one to the graveside, as it is written, "No person can by any means redeem a fellow person from death" (Psalms 49.8).

The third friend, the least considered one, is made up of the good deeds of a person's life. These never leave one, and they even precede one to plead one's cause before the King of Kings, as it is written, "And your righteousness shall go before you" (Psalm 85.13). (*Pirke de Rabbi Eleazar*)

## Questions

1. Do you have friends who can be compared to the kinds of friends discussed in the above story?
2. Do you agree with the comparisons made in the story?
3. What is the moral of the story? Do you agree with that moral?
4. Think of the very first person with whom you wanted to be friends. Why did you choose him or her? Is he or she still your friend today?
5. Suppose that you and your close friend are neck and neck in the race to be valedictorian of your senior class. Do you think you could both pursue this goal and still remain good friends?
6. *Menorat ha-Maor*, a biblical commentary, gives advice to a person who wants to show that he or she is truly a friend.

Be first to greet your friend, invite your friend to your joyful occasions, call your friend by complimentary names, never give away your friend's secrets, help when your friend is in trouble, look after your friend's interests when your friend is away, overlook

your friend's shortcomings and forgive your friend promptly, criticize when your friend has done wrong, respect your friend always, do not deceive your friend, do not lie to your friend, pray for your friend and wish your friend happiness, arrange a burial if your friend dies.

What advice would you give to someone who wants to show that he or she is truly worthy of being a friend?

List your advice for friendship.

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_

## The Separated Friends

This legend about two friends demonstrates the commitment that one friend has for the other, even when life itself is on the line. The story is also an illustration of the advice in *Ethics of the Fathers*, “Get yourself a companion” (*Pirke Avot* 1.6).

There were two close friends who had been separated by war so that they lived in different kingdoms. Once one of them went to visit his friend, and because he came from the city of the king's enemy, he was imprisoned and sentenced to be executed as a spy.

No amount of pleading would save him, so he begged the king for kindness.

“Your majesty,” he said, “let me have just one month to return to my land and put my affairs in order so my family will be cared for after my death. At the end of the month I will return to pay the penalty.”

“How can I believe you will return?” asked the king. “What security can you offer?”

“My friend will be my security,” said the man. “He will pay for my life with his if I do not return.”

The king called in the man’s friend, and to his amazement, the friend agreed to the conditions.

On the last day of the month the sun was setting, and the man had not yet returned. The king ordered the man’s friend killed in his stead. As the sword was about to descend the man returned and quickly placed the sword on his own neck. But his friend stopped him. “Let me die for you,” he pleaded.

The king was deeply moved. He ordered the sword taken away and pardoned both of them.

“Since there is such great love and friendship between the two of you,” he said, “I entreat you to let me join you as a third.”

And from that day on the two friends became the king’s companions. And it was in this spirit that our sages of blessed memory said, “Get yourself a companion.”

*(Beit ha-Midrash, Adolf Jellinek)*

## Questions

1. Do you think that the friends' commitment to each other in this story goes beyond reason? Can you think of a modern-day example of someone who went to great trouble for a friend?
2. How can two friends gain additional friends together? Does this story provide any advice?
3. What must one do to keep a friendship strong? Why do you think that some friendships dissolve quickly, while others last much longer? What makes for a long-lasting friendship?
4. How much should you inconvenience yourself for a friend? Would you speak up for your friend even though it might hurt you?
5. We are told in *Avot de Rabbi Natan* 23 that a true leader is one who can turn an enemy into a friend. Can you think of an example of someone who was able to do this?
6. Recent studies have shown that the following traits are highly desirable in attracting friends. With a partner in your class, share your feelings about each of these traits. Then talk to your partner about other character traits of people with whom you are most likely to become friends.

Pleasantness

Considerateness

Reliability

Sense of humor

Standing up for one's convictions

Ability to carry on a conversation

# 4. Common Decency— Derekh Eretz

The answer “yes” (to a knock on the door) does not mean “enter” but “wait” (Talmud, *Bava Kamma* 33a).

The Hebrew term *derekh erez* (literally, “the way of the land”) is difficult to define exactly. It has often been used to connote decency, decorum, proper etiquette, good manners, common courtesies and even *savoir faire*. The term definitely has ethical implications, for as a whole it refers to a code of proper behavior toward people.

Rabbinic literature is filled with rules and suggestions on dignified conduct, common courtesy and good manners. It covers almost every aspect of a person’s behavior, including seemingly insignificant things. Areas covered include how to speak, how to dress, how to walk, how to eat and drink, how to treat other people and how to conduct one’s personal relationships.

## From Our Tradition

# How to Love

This tale, told by Rabbi Moshe Leib Sassover, teaches an important lesson about how one ought to treat a fellow human being.

Rabbi Moshe Leib Sassover used to say, “I learned from a peasant how to love my fellow Jews. Once at a party I heard a drunken peasant say to his friend, ‘Do you love me or not?’

The other answered, ‘I love you greatly.’

The first peasant asked, ‘Do you know what I need?’

‘How can I possibly know what you need?’ came the reply.

‘How then,’ said the peasant, ‘can you say that you love me, when you don’t know what I need?’”

From this Reb Moshe Leib learned to love Israel. “Feel their needs, know their pain, be part of their suffering.”

## Questions

1. According to this story, what are the most important abilities for one person to show love to another? Do you agree that love includes these abilities?
2. According to the Talmud (*Rosh ha-Shanah* 16b), a student should visit his teacher every holiday. According to the Talmud (*Derekh Eretz Rabbah*, chapter 5), a person should never leave the company of his teacher, or even his fellow students, unless first obtaining permission to do so. What common



courtesies do you believe a student ought to afford a teacher? What common courtesies do you believe students ought to extend to their classes?

3. Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah (*Pirke Avot* 3.23) said, “If there is no Torah, there is no *derekh erez*, and if there is no *derekh erez*, there is no Torah.” What do you think he meant by this statement?
4. How often do you compliment other people? Do you feel that you receive enough compliments in your daily life, or would you like to receive more of them?

## How To Compliment a Bride

This Talmudic text presents the views of both Rabbi Hillel and Rabbi Shammai as they attempt to answer the question of how one should compliment a bride even if one feels that she is not particularly good-looking. Rabbi Hillel was known to be less stringent and rigorous than Rabbi Shammai, and more often than not his views have been accepted as custom.

Our rabbis asked, “How does one compliment a bride?”

Bet Shammai says, “A bride as she is.”

But Bet Hillel says, “A beautiful and graceful bride.”

Bet Shammai said to Bet Hillel, “If she were lame or blind, would you still call her ‘a beautiful and graceful bride,’ since the Torah says, ‘Keep far from falsehood’” (*Exodus* 23.7)?

Bet Hillel said to Bet Shammai, “According to you, when someone makes a bad purchase in the market should you praise it before him, or defame it? Surely you should praise it. Therefore, the sages concluded,

‘One should always be pleasant toward people’”

(Talmud, *Ketubot* 16b-17a).

## Questions

1. In the case of a bride, do you agree with Bet Hillel that one should “fudge” the truth in order to make her feel good? Are there other times when common decency warrants fudging the truth to protect another’s feelings? Would you compliment a person regardless of whether or not that person deserved the compliment?
2. Have you ever had a teacher you called by his or her first name? Why did you do so? Is it disrespectful, as the rabbis have often stated, to call a teacher by a first name?
3. According to the Talmud (*Derekh Eretz Zutah*, chapter 6), one should not sit down at a table to eat before one’s elders have taken their seats. What are some other nice things that one can do for one’s elders?
4. “Running up the score” in sports means trying to score as many points as possible, even when you are already far ahead in the game. Some people believe that running up the score is bad sportsmanship and lacks respect for one’s opponent. Others feel that you play sports to win the game, and it is insulting to the losing team if the winning team stops trying. What do you think? Is it proper *derekh eretz* to run up the score in a game that is clearly a mismatch?
5. Can one be a decent person and be ignorant of Torah? Why do you think Judaism commands us to act with common decency?

# 5. Keeping Commitments— Hithayevut

It is better to make no promises at all than to make them, even if one is certain of fulfilling them.

(Talmud, *Hullin* 2a)

Whether one calls it a vow, a promise or simply one's word, all Jewish views emphasize the importance of keeping a commitment. One's word is tied to one's belief in God and in God's presence in the world and our lives. The Torah teaches (*Numbers* 30.3) that a person who makes a vow, who makes a promise to God or who takes an oath to do something must carry out that promise. The third of the Ten Commandments obligates a person not to utter the name of God in a promise in vain.

The most comprehensive of all Jewish law codes, the *Shulhan Arukh*, devotes many chapters to the laws of promises and vows. As an example of how seriously the Jewish community considered vows, the opening chapter on vows in the *Code of Jewish Law* states, "Do not be in the habit of making vows. The one who does make a vow is called wicked."

## From Our Tradition

# The Falsely Accused Jew

This story from *Sefer Hasidim* describes the dilemma of a Jew who was put on trial and required to take an oath, even though he was in the habit of not doing so.

It once happened that gentiles falsely accused a Jew of a crime. The Jew was put on trial and was required to take an oath. He swore truthfully, declaring himself innocent of the charges. Afterwards he said to the rabbi, “Although I told the truth, I regret taking the oath and uttering God’s name. My father and mother never took an oath, even a true one, as long as they were alive. I was compelled to swear, and I did so against my will, since otherwise I would have been condemned to death.”

The rabbi answered, “If you want to atone for this, you should resolve never again to utter God’s name, either to affirm a true statement or in vain, in German or in any other language, as people are in the habit of saying, ‘May God help us.’ Do not use such expressions. Enunciate God’s name only when you are reading biblical verses or pray. Do not do business with a person unless you can trust him without having to resort to taking an oath, so that you will not be drawn into a situation where you will have to swear.”

## Questions

1. How often do you find yourself making a vow or a promise? Did you ever make a promise that you were unable to keep? Are there times when we can make promises we have no intention of keeping?

2. Why do you think that Jewish tradition urges people not to make promises or vows?
3. According to *Ethics of the Fathers* 3.13, “Vows are meant to be a fence for abstinence.” What do you think this means?
4. The *Zohar*, the *Book of Mysticism*, asks, “What is a desirable oath?” It answers, “If an evil impulse is leading you away from the performance of a commandment, take an oath that you will perform the commandment.” How would you answer the question, “What is a desirable oath?”

## The Vows of the Kol Nidre Prayer

One of the best-known statements about promises and vows comes from the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur, in the form of the Kol Nidre prayer. This unusual declaration specifies that all our unfulfilled promises to God are null and void. It has been said that Kol Nidre was originally designed to protect Jews who had been forced to convert to Christianity in order to save their lives. It allowed them to make Christian promises without being afraid that they had turned their backs on Judaism.

All vows, promises, obligations and oaths to God where-with we have vowed, sworn and bound ourselves from this Day of Atonement till the next day of Atonement, may it come to us for good. Of all these, we repent us in them. They shall be absolved, released, annulled, made void and of no effect. They shall not be binding, nor shall they have any power. Our vows to God shall not be vows, and our bonds shall not be bonds, and our oaths shall not be oaths. (Kol Nidre prayer)

## Questions

1. Were there any vows you made to God this year that you want to be annulled? There is a custom to have the cantor recite the Kol Nidre prayer three times in succession. Why do you think this is?
2. Rabbi Eliezer once said (Talmud, *Shevuot* 36a) “Yes is an oath, and no is an oath.” What do you think he meant by this? Can you give an example?
3. What do you think should happen to people who do not keep their promises?
4. Are there any times when it is important to make promises?