In This Issue

Retirement

For many years, America had lost its most capable and knowledgeable people to ... retirement. In universities as well as business, there were mandatory retirement rules demanding that a person leave his profession when he reached age 65. Fortunately, in recent years, there has been a rethinking of this policy.

From the vantage point of Jewish tradition, which prizes wisdom, these rules make little sense. The older a person is, the more likely he or she is to have acquired life experience and wisdom. Thus, rather than being denied an opportunity to share their knowledge, Judaism teaches that elders should lead our people.

In the Torah, many of the greatest leaders of the Jewish People gain their positions at an advanced age. Abraham first responds to God's call that he go to Canaan when he is 75 years old. Later on, when the Israelites leave Egypt, they are led by Moses and Aaron - ages 80 and 83 respectively.

The Talmud states: "If the youth tell you to build, and the elders tell you to destroy, you should destroy and not build, because the destruction of the elders is in itself constructive."

Rechavam, King Solomon's son, is described in the Bible as abandoning the advice given to him by his older advisors for the counsel of his younger advisors. The result? He loses most of his kingdom and the Jewish nation becomes irrevocably divided into the Northern Kingdom and the Kingdom of Judah. Had he followed the advice of the elders, this tragedy could have been prevented.

Respect for elders is discussed in this week's Torah portion, Kedoshim. The word *"kedoshim"* means "holiness," and much of the Parsha discusses laws which are designed to help the Jewish People become a holy nation. Among these laws is an injunction to *"stand up before an old person and give respect to the elders"* (Leviticus 19:32). This injunction was taken quite literally by the sources and Jewish law mandates that one stand up out of respect when an elder passes by. The Shulchan Aruch, the Code of Jewish Law, says that a person acquires the status of "elder" at age 70. Gentile elders are also to be honored and respected. The observance of this Mitzvah is still followed today by many observant Jews.

Included within the laws of respecting an elder is not to sit in his seat, not to answer in his stead, and not to contradict his words. Interestingly, these laws are similar to those that

are to be observed by a child toward his or her parents. In both instances there is, among other things, the recognition of greater wisdom on the part of the senior partner in the relationship.

However, Jewish tradition does not relegate the province of wisdom solely to those who have reached the age of 70. The same respect and recognition is given to those who achieve great scholarship and wisdom even at much younger ages. For instance, Jewish law also requires that one stand when a young Torah scholar passes by.

The Torah concludes there are two ways to acquire wisdom: Through life experience, and through learning Torah.

Is Self-Interest Incompatible with Altruism?

From the moment of our birth, we clamour for our wants and needs, and we spend the rest of our lives pursuing them. Clearly, God has hard-wired self-interest deep into the human psyche, so it's certainly not something we view as necessarily evil. On the contrary, halacha – Jewish law – explicitly reflects this. The Talmud sets out the following scenario: two people are walking in the desert, and one of them has a flask of water. There's only enough water for one of them to make it to civilisation; if they share the water, they will die. The great Talmudic sage, Rabbi Akiva, rules that in such a case, "your life comes first"; the one who has the water drinks it. Survival of the self comes first.

At the same time, while self-interest is a powerful and unshakeable force of human nature, it can also be extremely destructive. Even self-destructive. As the Mishna in Pirkei Avot says: "Jealousy, physical desires and the pursuit of honour remove a person from this world."

Jealousy, desire and honour are all selfcentred forces within a person, and the Mishna is saying that a person who is selfcentred ultimately brings destruction on himself. God has created the world in such a way that when a person blindly pursues selfgratification, he paradoxically does grave harm to himself. Those who are consumed with jealousy, with the pursuit of their physical desires, with acquiring honour and recognition from others at all costs, find no peace of mind and are drawn to act in ways that harm not just the people they perceive to be standing in their way – they harm themselves too.

It goes beyond that, to our ultimate calling in this world, which is a calling towards holiness. This week's parsha, Kedoshim, opens with a clarion call to the Jewish people: "You shall be holy, for I, Hashem your God, am holy." (Vayikra 19:2) What is this call to holiness? What does it mean to be holy? And what does it mean that God is holy?

Rabbi Shimon Shkop, one of the great Lithuanian sages of the pre-war years, has a fascinating explanation. He says God's essential "characteristic", as far as we can talk about such

things, is His pure goodness and kindness. God is completely self-sufficient; He needs nothing, nor does He receive anything, and everything He does is therefore an act of pure, unreciprocated kindness – from the creation of the universe to taking care of our smallest needs, and the needs of the smallest and seemingly most insignificant of creatures. This selfless giving is how Rabbi Shkop defines holiness, and it is this we are called on to emulate so that we, too, can become holy.

It's a beautiful idea, but the Midrash gives us pause for thought, saying God reaches a level of holiness that no human being can. Rabbi Shkop explains the Midrash: no human being can ever attain this ideal like God, because we have been created with an intrinsic love of and concern for the self, which will always factor into the equation.

So, we have a dilemma: how do we attain holiness – defined as acting purely selflessly – when we are unable to do so? How do we reconcile the conflicting ideals of selfinterest and pure giving?

Rabbi Shkop has an answer that is deep and beautiful. If the self is getting in the way of helping others, then we need to expand our definition of the self.

When we refer to "I", who are we talking about? Who or what is contained in our definition of self? Rabbi Shkop explains that a lowly, coarse person sees himself, defines his "I", as purely a physical body. Someone slightly more elevated sees his soul as part of his self-identity. At a higher level, one's identity encompasses one's spouse and children, and then one's community, and so it goes. An even greater person includes the entire Jewish people in his sense of "I", and even beyond that – the entire world. The more spiritually elevated a person, the more people included in that person's sense of "I".

So the call to holiness is not about selfdenial. It is a call to become a greater person by expanding the definition of "self", and in so doing, unleashing the powerful force of giving and kindness to so many more people, and in a much richer, more fulfilling, far holier way.

Of course, it's not so easy; it is, indeed, a lifelong journey. Initially, life is only about meeting our own needs. Then we graduate from this survivalist state of being; we marry and start a family, assuming greater responsibility, expanding our definition of self to encompass others. And we continue expanding our world, taking on responsibility for our community, for those around us, for the Jewish people as a whole, and even for the entire world. It's a cosmic journey of selfdiscovery and self-transformation whose destination is the soul's perfection and its ultimate expression.

Essentially, the more we reach out to others, the greater we become. This is why, when a child is born, we pray: "May this katan" – this small one, "become gadol" – become big. We pray for this infant, so naturally preoccupied with meeting its immediate physical needs, to become an adult in the fullest sense of the word, to become someone who sees the people around him, really sees them, and has an expansive perspective of the world, and an expansive definition of self.

This worldview touches on so much of Judaism. There are many mitzvot of chessed (loving kindness): comforting mourners, visiting the sick, burying the dead, tzedakah – helping those

in need. So much of the Torah is about reaching out to others, about taking responsibility for community and making the world a better place.

On a personal level, it is also about building family. The act of constituting a marriage is termed by our sages as kiddushin, which comes from the Hebrew word kedusha, meaning holiness. In what way is marriage an act of holiness? Creating a marriage should be the ultimate act of giving to another. By defining marriage as an act of holiness, our sages are teaching us that marriage is all about selfless giving, and that the creation of a family is all about expanding the concept of "self" and reaching out to others; transcending the self to becoming a greater person.

When fulfilling each other is a priority for husband and wife, other desires and preferences become subordinate. By putting our own needs aside, we don't feel that we are sacrificing anything.

Essentially, then, through marriage a person expands his definition of self and demonstrates that his life is not only about his own immediate, personal, selfish needs, but rather the needs of another human being, to constitute a broader, greater human being. As it says in the book of Bereishit, when God gave direction for the very first marriage in history between Adam and Eve, He said: "Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother and cleave to his wife and they shall become one flesh." (2:24)

Marriage is about two people becoming one, a process of transcending the self and evolving to become a greater being. And that is why the bringing together of Adam and Eve is prefaced with the words: "It is not good for a person to be alone." It is not good for us to be limited, when this expanded definition of the self, this broadmindedness, this human greatness and holiness is ours for the taking. That definition of self is further expanded as children are born.

Life is a journey towards holiness, a journey towards expanding the self and achieving the greatness that God knows we are capable of.

A Moral Compass

Immediately prior to detailing the forbidden sexual relationships, God declares: 'My judgements you shall do and My decrees you shall safeguard; I am the Lord, your God' (*Lev.* 18:4). The Torah's use of two different terms – 'judgements' and 'decrees' – in the same sentence, seems strange. Rashi distinguishes between these two terms. He explains that the logic behind a judgement is clear. Decrees, on the other hand, are handed down by those with authority and are not necessarily always understood by those who are subjected to them. Thus, one generally understands the rationale behind *judgements*– for example, the prohibitions against murdering and stealing (*Ex.* 20:13) – and would observe them even without the existence of a command imposed by an external authority. In contrast, regarding *decrees*, such as the prohibition against wearing a garment that combines wool and linen (*Lev.* 19:19; *Deut.* 22:11), there would be no obvious

reason to act in that way in the absence of an explicit command. Whilst the latter seems to lack the obvious reasoning of the former, they both derive from the same eternally binding divine source, and this is reinforced by the repetition of the aforementioned refrain: 'I am the Lord, your God' throughout this chapter that is entirely devoted to forbidden relationships (*Lev.* 18:2, 4-6, 21, 30). Why is the divine origin of these laws so strongly emphasised in this chapter?

If a liberal group of twenty-first century university students was asked to define a standard sexual ethic, their typical response would be expected to be that consenting adults may do whatever they want in private as long as it does not cause harm to or impede upon the rights of others. However, applying this principle to two consenting adult siblings would repulse many of these same students. Even though in principle, incest between consenting adults complies with the aforementioned standard, an intuitive morality forces most people to differentiate.

If moral laws are based on a subjective standard, eventually even the stipulation that the rights of others may not be impeded upon will be challenged. Hitler famously wrote:

> Yes, we are barbarians! We want to be barbarians! It is an honourable title…Providence has ordained that I should be the greatest liberator of humanity. I am freeing men from the dirty and degrading self-mortifications of a false vision (a Jewish invention) called 'conscience' and 'morality' (Hermann Rauschning, *Hitler Speaks*).

When the standards of moral behaviour derive from a subjective source, the floodgates are thus opened. The Aztecs believed that human sacrifices were necessary for the sun to rise (Jacques Soustelle, *Daily Life of the Aztecs)*, and the Torah mentions child sacrifice in the context of those worshipping the pagan deity Molech (Ramban on *Lev.* 18:21). These extreme historical precedents show the extent to which personal subjective ethics can justify acts that we today instinctively deem as immoral.

History shows the countless pitfalls of subjective morality. While not immune to tragic exceptions, Judaism has always revered an objective morality that adapts rather than changes in accordance with the context. Perhaps it is this philosophy that is the reason behind the Torah's repetition of the phrase 'I am the Lord, your God' throughout the chapter dealing with forbidden relationships. In an ever-changing ethical landscape, the Torah serves as the objective moral compass for every individual, requiring us to be sensitive to others, while maintaining a constant sense of moral integrity.

The Right Choice

This week's portion speaks of the good that will befall the Jewish people if they live up to being a light to the nations, and then talks about what will happen if not. Unfortunately, the latter part

of the portion is much more the story of Jewish history than the former.

The "curses" do seem incredibly harsh, but allow me to explain.

Jews do not look at God as One Who "punishes" us for our "sins." Rather, in a world of cause and effect; there are consequences to our actions. Good begets good, and bad, bad. This is reflected very clearly in the physical world. If you know that a certain food is poisonous and you eat it, you have only yourself to blame when you become ill. Don't blame God for making harmful food; it's your own fault for eating it.

Conversely, if you eat properly and exercise regularly, you will probably be healthy. Of course, there are no guarantees; there are health freaks who get sick, and those who jump off the Golden Gate Bridge and survive. But in general, we live in a world of cause and effect. Do things in the appropriate manner and life will go well. Make mistakes and you will have problems.

The same is true in the spiritual realm. There are consequences to our choices. And this is what the Torah is pointing out. Make the right spiritual choices and the world will work for you. Make the wrong ones and the world will turn on you. It's all spelled out for us and we have no one to blame but ourselves if we jump off a spiritual building – and land with a big bang.

When things go wrong in life, we usually look for someone to blame. When we run out of people to blame, God is the obvious next choice. It's so easy to become angry with God for our problems. The reality is, though, He has warned us: eat the poison and you will be sick.

But why make consequences? Why not make the world just a pure Garden of Eden?

Imagine it: a perfect world. It doesn't matter what you do, everything turns out just right. Spend all day watching *Desperate Housewives* and your business still makes millions. Be obnoxious and people love you. Swear at people and they smile back. Steal and you never get caught. Drive like and lunatic and you never crash. Jump out of a plane with no parachute at 30,000 feet and you don't even ruin your hairdo.

Is that perfection? Is that the type of world we would want?

Personally, I can't imagine anything worse. Such a world would be completely and utterly meaningless. Without consequences – both good and bad – nothing at all would matter. There would be no purpose to our choosing.

Consequences make life exciting. They mean that our actions matter; that our choices make a difference.

We want a world of consequences, and we have been given a world of consequences. If we make the right choices, the consequences will be wonderful. But we often make the wrong choices and face painful consequences as a result. Instead of asking ourselves why we ate the poison, we blame God for putting it there in the first place. The solution is to make the right choice.