

REVIEW

Joseph Telushkin

A Code of Jewish Ethics. Volume I: You Shall be Holy

(New York: Bell Tower, 2006), xiv + 560 pp.

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This is the first of a three volume work, the first code of its kind. This volume deals primarily with character development. The second volume, *Love Your Neighbor* will address the ethics pertinent to interpersonal relations: obligations to the weakest and most vulnerable; between employers and employees; between Jews and non-Jews; between those who disagree; etc. The final volume, not yet named, will deal with family, friendship and community.

As a Christian ethicist who writes on virtue, I found this work very engaging and enlightening. Virtue ethics is basically a departure from most contemporary forms of ethics which establish prescriptions for recommended actions and prohibitions against wrong actions. As opposed to giving priority to the ethical assessment of actions, virtue ethics focuses first, though not exclusively, on persons and their character, and then, on the actions they should or should not perform. Virtue ethics is an attempt to return to the approach that most of the ancients (Jewish, Greek, Roman, etc.) articulated, that is, a character-based ethics that presumes, if you want to perform right actions, you should become a good person first. For this reason virtue ethics follows the adage that "actions follow from being." Moreover, to recommend some character traits or virtues over others, virtue ethicists often rely on narratives of virtuous exemplars. Finally, virtue ethicists usually presume that every human begins life with a strong inclination toward wrong-doing and therefore the first step to becoming virtuous is to harness these evil inclinations. All of these components are in Telushkin's pedagogically delightful work.

The first part, "The Task of a Lifetime," reflects on a modest assertion: "Judaism regards improving character as the goal of life." (37) This assertion means then that improving character is a life-time, and therefore, an endless task. Here he presents a basic anthropology: we have good and bad inclinations, and we need to be mindful of these, directing them to the appropriate ends. Interspersed with his pithy but incisive moral instructions are rich illustrative narratives, from other Rabbis, his own experience, the Talmud, other traditions, contemporary literature, etc. Thus, on one point, he instructs us to cultivate the friendship of people who are both good *and* wise, and then he tells a brief anecdote about the intellectual Martin Heidegger, who thought it appropriate to become a Nazi so as to secure his academic advancement. He concludes, "Heidegger was, in moral terms, an idiot." (41)

The heart of the book is the second part, "Basic Virtues and Vices" where he offers eleven for consideration: judging others fairly, gratitude, civility, common sense, repentance, forgiveness, humility, anger, humiliating others, envy, and hatred and revenge.

His virtues struck me as uneven. For instance, the virtue of justice is not to be found (it's not even listed in the index; perhaps justice will appear in his second or third volume). The closest he comes to justice is the first virtue: on judging others fairly. But of all the virtues that I found

the most original and striking, was the virtue of repentance. Members of every religious tradition should read this chapter and take it to heart.

Like Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Telushkin's vices are generally speaking, far more interesting than his virtues. Though he demonstrates how harmful these vices are, he wisely finds instances when these vices are actually virtues: when, for instance, anger is justifiable, hatred is permissible, envy could be good. Yet, even here, Telushkin demonstrates his ironic touch when just after commenting on the "good" envy of scholars for wisdom, he gives Joseph Epstein's, editor of the *American Scholar*, account that in his experience scholars rarely have kind words for their peers. Still, when he turns to humiliating others, he contends that there are no moral exceptions to this vice, though he differentiates it from shaming and argues that some instances of public shaming are permitted: fathers who do not provide for their children, husbands who abuse their wives, business people who promote unethical practices. Throughout all these accounts, clearly the greatest victim of vicious behavior is undoubtedly the agent, for we harm ourselves when we are intemperate, angry, hateful, or envious. Conversely, we become the beneficiaries of our virtuous practices, since virtue becomes its own reward.

Three brief but important parts lead us to the conclusion. The first, fair speech, begins with an account on *Lashon hara* (literally "evil tongue") and moves to instances of how we use truth-telling to harm others. Brilliantly he describes the self-deceptive arguments we use to validate these practices and in unveiling their flaws, he draws us to see inevitably how self-destructive the evil tongue is.

Then he turns to the excellence of leading the holy life, by reflecting on *Kiddush Hashem*, that is, sanctifying God's Name in daily life. He concludes with God as the basis of morality.

This wonderful work is a superb reference book for any one interested in the moral life. Telushkin instructs wisely and well and orients us to an appreciation of the fact that we become moral through our ordinary lives. If we realize that every time we act, we act either with God or without, virtuously or viciously, then we begin to see how the call to be holy is a perpetual call. By inviting us to see the everyday opportunities before us, Telushkin accompanies us with a new, but in many ways very traditional and humane text.