

# Does It Pay to Be Good?

by Noah Cheses

**Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm**

Jewish Center, June 10, 1972

Does it pay to be good? This 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 is unfair.” Much earlier, the Rabbis broodingly concluded that the reward for virtue simply is not in evidence in this world (*Kiddushin* 39b).

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? An individual who plans to be moral because it pays to be good will end up either an evil person or one who will suffer constant frustration. Judaism taught us, “Do not be like servants who serve the master only in order to receive a salary or a wage” (*Avot* 1:3). 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 that person good. Yet it is not quite that 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.

## דברים א':כ"ג

(כ) וְאָמַר אֲלֵכֶם בְּאַתֶּם עַד-הָרַק הָאֲמֹרִי אֲשֶׁר-יִהְיֶה אֲלֵהֵינוּ נִתֵּן לָנוּ: (כא) וְרָאָה נִתְּן יְהוָה אֲלֵהֶיךָ לִפְנֵיךָ אֶת-הָאָרֶץ עֲלֶיהָ רִשׁ בְּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר יְהוָה אֲלֵהֶי אֲבֹתֶיךָ לֵךְ אֶל-מִיכָא וְאֶל-תַּחֲת: (כב) וַתִּקְרְבוּן אֵלַי בְּלִבְכֶם וַתֹּאמְרוּ נִשְׁלַחְהָ אֲנָשִׁים לִפְנֵינוּ וְנַחְפְּרוּ-

לְגוֹ אֶת־הָאָרֶץ וַיָּשׁוּבוּ אֲתָנּוּ דָבָר אֶת־הַדִּלְרָף אֲשֶׁר נִעְלָה־בָּהּ וְאֵת הַעֲרִים אֲשֶׁר נָבֵא אֱלֹהֵינוּ: (כג) וַיִּיטֹב בְּעֵינֵי הַדָּבָר וְאָקַח מִכֶּם שְׁנַיִם עָשָׂר אַנְשִׁים אִישׁ אֶחָד לְשִׁבְטוֹ:

### [Deuteronomy 1:20-23](#)

(20) I said to you, “You have come to the hill country of the Amorites which the LORD our God is giving to us. (21) See, the LORD your God has placed the land at your disposal. Go up, take possession, as the LORD, the God of your fathers, promised you. Fear not and be not dismayed.” (22) Then all of you came to me and said, “Let us send men ahead to reconnoiter the land for us and bring back word on the route we shall follow and the cities we shall come to.” (23) I approved of the plan, and so I selected twelve of your men, one from each tribe.

### [במדבר י"ג:ב'](#)

(ב) שְׁלַח־לְךָ אַנְשִׁים וַיְתַרְוּ אֶת־הָאָרֶץ כַּנְעַן אֲשֶׁר־אָנֹכִי נֹתֵן לְבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אִישׁ אֶחָד לְאִישׁ אֶחָד לְמִטֵּה אֲבֹתָיו תִּשְׁלָחוּ כֹל נָשִׂיא בְּהֵם:

### [Numbers 13:2](#)

(2) “Send men to scout the land of Canaan, which I am giving to the Israelite people; send one man from each of their ancestral tribes, each one a chieftain among them.”

### [רש"י על במדבר י"ג:ב':ב'](#)

**שלח לך.** לדעתך, אני איני מצווה לך, אם תרצה שלח; לפי שבאו ישראל ואמרו נשלחה אנשים לפנינו, כמה שנאמר ותקרבון אלי כלכם וגו' (דברים א'), ומשה נמלך בשכינה, אמר, אמרתי להם שהיא טובה, שנאמר "אעלה אתכם" מֵעֵנִי מִצָּרִים" וגו' (שמות ג'), חִיִּיהֶם שְׁאֲנִי נוֹתֵן לָהֶם מְקוֹם לְטָעוֹת בְּדַבְרֵי מְרַגְלִים, לְמַעַן לֹא יִירָשׁוּהָ (תנחומא)

### [Rashi on Numbers 13:2:2](#)

SEND THEE (more lit., for thyself) — i.e. according to your own judgement: I do not command you, but if you wish to do so send them. — God said this because the Israelites came to Moses and said. “We will send men before us etc.”, as it is said, (Deuteronomy 1:22): “And you approached me, all of you, [saying, We will send men, etc.]”, and Moses took counsel with the Shechinah (the Lord), whereupon He said to them, I have told them long ago that it (the land) is good, as it is said, (Exodus 3:17): “I will bring you up out of the affliction of Egypt ... [unto a land flowing with milk and honey]”. By their lives! I swear that I will give them now an opportunity to fall into error through the statements of the spies, so that they should not come into possession of it (the land) (Sotah 34b; cf. also Rashi on Sotah 34b:8 מדעתך and Midrash Tanchuma, Sh'lach 5).

### [משנה אבות א':ג'](#)

(ג) אַנְטִיגֵנוֹס אִישׁ סוּכוֹ קִבֵּל מִשְׁמֵעוֹן הַצַּדִּיק. הוּא הָיָה אוֹמֵר, אַל תְּהִי כְעַבְדִּים הַמְשֻׁמְשִׁין אֶת הָרֵב עַל מְנַת לְקַבֵּל פְּרָס, אֲלֵא הוּוּ כְעַבְדִּים הַמְשֻׁמְשִׁין אֶת הָרֵב וְשָׂלַא עַל מְנַת לְקַבֵּל פְּרָס, וַיְהִי מוֹרָא שְׁמַיִם עֲלֵיכֶם:

### [Pirkei Avot 1:3](#)

(3) Antigonus a man of Socho received [the oral tradition] from Shimon the Righteous. He used to say: do not be like servants who serve the master in the expectation of receiving a reward, but

be like servants who serve the master without the expectation of receiving a reward, and let the fear of Heaven be upon you.

### משנה פאה א' א'

(א) אלו דברים שאין להם שעור. הפאה, והבכורים, והראיון, וגמילות חסדים, ומלמוד תורה. אלו דברים שאדם אוכל, פרומיהו בעולם הזה והקרן קנמת לו לעולם הבא. כבוד אב ואם, וגמילות חסדים, והקצאת שלום בין אדם לחברו, ומלמוד תורה פנגד כלם:

### Mishnah Peah 1:1

(1) These are the things that have no definite quantity: The corners [of the field]. First-fruits; [The offerings brought] on appearing [at the Temple on the three pilgrimage festivals]. The performance of righteous deeds; And the study of the torah. The following are the things for which a man enjoys the fruits in this world while the principal remains for him in the world to come: Honoring one's father and mother; The performance of righteous deeds; And the making of peace between a person and his friend; And the study of the torah is equal to them all.

### **Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm**

Jewish Center, June 10, 1972

The incident of Moses and the spies he sent into Canaan provides an illustration of a case where **it did not pay to be good**. God told Moses, "Send for yourself people to spy out the land of Canaan" (Numbers 13:2). But according to the way the Rabbis (as cited by Rashi ad loc.) interpreted this incident, the relations between God, Israel, and Moses were quite complex, and the role of Moses was anomalous.

In other words, the sending of the spies was a concession, like the permission to appoint a king over themselves, or the granting of permission for the eating of meat to the children of Noah, or the law of the beautiful captive. 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 truly just, some say merely innocent, and some say they were wicked. But I prefer a fourth interpretation, that of *Midrash Tanhuma*, which declares them "*kesilim*" – 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 1:23, Moses, in recollecting the story of the spies, said: "*Vayitav be'einay hadavar*," 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 favor it, and that he consulted with the Divine Presence which discouraged him? I submit that, perhaps, the expression of “*vayitav be'einay hadavar*” means, in essence: I, Moses, considered the matter and decided to be good to you. And of course – Moses 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.

So, all of us must learn in our personal and professional and especially family lives that 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 over-pressing material good 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, “*vayitav be'einay hadavar*,” we are being good to them, but is it really good for them?...

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.

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 to do good.

But if it means: “Does it pay to be good toward the beneficiary?” the answer is that it depends upon that individual, upon his maturity and sense of proportion, upon that person’s 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.