Good, Bad, or Both: Thoughts for Parashat Re’eh

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Re'eh
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Are human beings basically animals who need to be tamed by the forces of civilization? Or are humans angelic beings who sometimes get dragged down by the external forces of nature?

Thomas Hobbes coined the proverb that homo homini lupus, “man is wolf to man.” We can’t trust each other—or ourselves!—to act in a non-wolf-like pattern; we need to be controlled by laws, to be forced to behave morally. The role of religion and civilization is to curb our innate tendency toward aggression and violence.

On the other hand, some argue that humans are innately kind and cooperative; we descend into violent behavior because of pressures from outside ourselves e.g. feeling threatened by others, living in an environment of poverty or drug addiction. If we could clean up the external negative features of society, we would all live nice, quiet, moral lives.

Proponents of the Hobbesian view draw on the notion of “survival of the fittest.” According to this theory, humans (and indeed all animals) are engaged in an ongoing struggle for survival. There is a never-ending competition for resources; only the strongest prevail and reproduce. Weaker animals are killed or die out. Thus, the best strategy for survival is to destroy the competition.

Yet, this theory has been seriously challenged by a growing number of contemporary researchers. In his important writings, Frans de Waal has provided evidence to demonstrate that animals—including human beings—actually enhance their prospects for survival by cooperative behavior. By working together with others, they are better able to maintain the safety and security of their groups. In his book, “The Age of Empathy,” he points to nature’s lessons for a kinder society. Being nice is not only an abstract moral principle; it is a key

ingredient for survival and happiness. In his book, “Beyond Revenge,” Michael McCullough has described the evolution of the forgiveness instinct. Just as we have an urge to take revenge, we also have a strong streak within us that encourages us to forgive.

Jewish tradition has long understood that human beings are complex, that we have both positive and negative inclinations. Judaism does not view humanity as a group of individuals struggling for survival by engaging in wolf-like aggression against others; nor does it view humanity as an innately peace-loving, altruistic group.

We like to think that we are essentially good and that we have the power to overcome our evil inclinations. In this week’s Torah portion, we find the instruction to share with the poor. “You shall not harden your heart nor clench your fist from your needy brother (Devarim 15:7).” Rabbi Yitzhak Shemuel Reggio, a 19th century Italian Torah commentator, notes: “One who holds himself back from helping a poor and impoverished person needs to harden his heart, because compassion is part of human nature.” In other words, we are essentially good, compassionate individuals who naturally want to help others. Only by hardening our hearts can we overcome our natural tendency to do good.

This optimistic assessment of human nature was alluded to in a comment attributed to Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik. The Rav noted that according to Freudian psychology, human beings at root are filled with animal instincts. If you scratch deeply enough into the human psyche, you will find aggressiveness, hostility, jealousy. The Rav contrasted this viewpoint with the classic Jewish teaching. If you go as deeply as possible into the human psyche, you will find holiness, a profound crying out for God. As the Psalmist declared: Mimaamakim keratikha Hashem, from our very depths we call out to God.

This week’s Torah portion reminds us of the obligation to do that which is upright and good, to live a morally responsible and respectable life. The optimistic Jewish view suggests that these are goals to which we are naturally disposed. We only sin if we deviate from our basic desire to live generously and compassionately. Yes, we do have negative inclinations, and yes, these inclinations can drag us down. But the hallmark of a truly religious person is the recognition that at root and in our depths we are endowed with a grand spirituality that is the key to an upright, good and happy life.

Angel for Shabbat