

The Three Gifts of Excellence

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So many people are dissatisfied with themselves. So many people want to be other people.

So let me ask: If we were to have the capacity to design ourselves, how would we put ourselves together? If instead of being made, we could make ourselves, what ingredients would we choose?

I know many people who would choose athletic prowess. It is so lucrative today. Star athletes are rich and famous. We consider them to be important to our lives. Where LeBron James would play next year consumed more of our time and more of our energy than all of the decisions of the Supreme Court's summer term.

Some of us would select the gift of genius. This, too, is lucrative. Many geniuses are rich and famous. Who wouldn't want to be the smartest in the class; the smartest in the school; the smartest in the industry; the smartest in the world?

Some of us would select the gift of talent: musical talent, artistic talent or, perhaps, literary talent. This, too, is lucrative. The most talented of us are rich and famous. Who wouldn't want to live the life of Paul McCartney, Bruce Springsteen or Lady Gaga – well – maybe not Lady Gaga!

And so: if we could do it all over again; if, magically, we were transported back to the first day of our lives, and we were to hover above ourselves as newborns, and if our Maker were to say to us: “you can choose three attributes that would predominate in this infant,” what would we choose?

There is a profound verse in the Book of Kings:

Va-yiten Elohim chochmah li-Shlomo, u-tevunah harbeh me'od, ve'rochav lev ka-chol asher al se'fat ha-yam. (I Kings 5:9)

And God endowed King Solomon with three gifts: *chochmah* – intelligence; *u-tevunah harbeh me'od*- and with very much wisdom; and *rochav lev* – and with a broad heart – a heart as vast as the sands on the seashore.

Intelligence, wisdom and a good heart: these are three attributes that God granted Solomon, the king, and the builder of God's Temple in Jerusalem. The Bible emphasizes the ascending order of importance: Solomon was granted intelligence; very much wisdom; and a huge measure of goodness - as vast as the sands on the seashore.

It seems to me that these are the attributes, in this order of importance, that allow us to live a good life: *chochmah*, *tevunah* and *rochav lev*: intelligence, wisdom even greater than intelligence and goodness in a vast amount – greater than intelligence and wisdom combined.

Let me dwell on each of these three human characteristics:

1. Intelligence – Chochmah

Intelligence is important to us. One of my earliest recollections is taking those standardized IQ tests. I might have been around four or five; they stocked us with number two pencils, and off we went answering some one hundred questions in the shortest possible time.

Today it seems like we give our children IQ tests in utero. Even before they are born they are listening to Mozart and consuming brain-healthy nourishment. At nine months they are already studying the material that will get them into the elite nursery schools. At every step of the way, we convey in stark and subtle ways our expectation of, and pride in, intelligence and intellectual accomplishments.

We are impressed with intelligence. We are impressed with grades; we are impressed with degrees that testify to high intelligence. We rank intelligence. We prize intelligence. We honor intelligence. We recruit intelligence.

Quite right, too. If it is the difference between a decade in prison or freedom, we want to know how smart is our attorney. We want to know where she went to school, where she ranked and what she produced. We want someone who is smarter than the attorney on the other side.

If it is the difference between good health and a lifetime of incapacities, we want to examine the degrees hanging on the wall of our doctor. If it is the difference between money in the bank and a life of struggle, we want to know that our financial advisor is intelligent. If it is the difference between custody of our child and splitting the baby in two, we want a judge as smart as Solomon.

If you were to build a complicated machine – like an oil rig - wouldn't you want the smartest engineers in the world - say from BP - to design it? Otherwise, the rig might collapse and who knows how much damage might be caused.

King Solomon was granted blazing intelligence, truly a God-given gift. No one was as intelligent as King Solomon. He was the smartest person in the world. The Bible describes how he could speak about practically any subject off the cuff. He excelled in both science and humanities. He spoke about trees and animals. He wrote proverbs. People came from far and wide to be in his presence, in the presence of surpassing genius.

But this wasn't enough. If it were enough, God would have been satisfied with granting Solomon this one attribute. The Bible would have simply told us that God granted Solomon intelligence. We would have then understood that this attribute – high intelligence - is the key ingredient of excellence. There would have been no need to grant Solomon the additional two gifts of wisdom and goodness.

If all Solomon had was a high IQ he might have still been able to make a living. People might have still come from far and wide to hear him solve equations and to speak about astrology, botany, biology, ecology, psychology, sociology, technology, theology – but to what aim and to what avail? We all know people who can whip off facts and figures practically at will: random thoughts, random intelligence, knowing everything about everything but nothing about life.

Genius is a tricky thing. You might be a genius in one thing; you might be exceptionally gifted in one area, but it doesn't necessarily translate into other areas of life. Sigmund Freud once wrote about his conversation with fellow genius, Albert Einstein: “He understands as much about psychology as I do about physics, so we had a very pleasant talk.”

How many of us know people who are truly brilliant; who were, by far, the smartest in the class but turned out to be dumb in life? How many of us know people who could solve the crossword puzzle swiftly, but could not navigate the crossroads of life even slowly? How many of us know people who could answer every clue on “Jeopardy!”, but had no clue how to avoid putting themselves into jeopardy?

There are people who attended the best colleges in the world and who did the worst deeds. It is too bad that the most evil are not also the least intelligent. I spent a few days in Germany this summer. Half the participants in the Wannsee Conference that planned the Final Solution carried the title “Doctor.”

Remember the Christmas Day Bomber who tried to bring down a Detroit bound plane last year? What struck me about him was not his evil intent. Sadly, by now, we have become accustomed to evil in its most naked form. What struck me was that Umar Farouk Abdul Muttallab is a mechanical engineer, having graduated from University College London.

Are you kidding me? UCL is now ranked the fourth best university in the world. No one can get into the mechanical engineering department at UCL; not even King Solomon.

How many of us know people who were described as the best and the brightest, but who were best at what was not bright and bright at what was not best?

Abdul Muttallab was best in the whole world in mechanical engineering but not bright enough to realize that if he wanted to get to heaven and spend eternity with 72 virgins perhaps the best course would not be to put a bomb in his underwear.

Intelligence is prone to arrogance. We can split the atom but have sown the seeds of our own destruction. We have built such sophisticated machines that we cannot turn them off when they go wrong. We have dug so deep that we cannot extract ourselves from the pollution below. We have so refined and computerized the accumulation of wealth that milliseconds of trading can bring down the world's economy. We are so smart that what took centuries to build up could be torn down in minutes.

Intelligence is fine. It is even wonderful. Smart people have facilitated human progress and have made life better. But human intelligence, such as it is today, is limited. At no time do we see the whole picture. At best we see only a small fraction of reality.

Tennyson wrote:

Little flower – but if I could understand
What you are, root and all, and all in all
I should know what God and Man is.

Intelligence without wisdom is like beauty on a deserted island: potential with nowhere to go.

Without wisdom high intelligence is a mirage; “proudly secure, yet liable to fall by weakest subtleties.” High intelligence is “not meant to rule, but to subserve where wisdom bears command.”

2. Wisdom – *Tevunah*

And hence God granted Solomon a double share of wisdom – *harbeh me'od* – very much wisdom – because it is more important than raw intelligence.

By *tevunah* we mean the subtle stuff of life that activates intelligence and makes it useful. We mean emotional intelligence, patience, deferred gratification, ability to cope with disappointment, setbacks, loss, uncertainty and failure. We mean discernment, judgment, awareness, intuition, imagination and common sense; the capacity to integrate, to connect the dots of life. We mean social intelligence and the ability to communicate verbally and non-verbally.

We might be smart; it does not mean that we will make smart decisions. John Edwards is smart. Mark Sanford is smart. Bernie Madoff is smart.

Smart people often make dumb decisions. Do you know that smart people need to be told today not to text message while they are driving? You've got all of these computer whizzes and multi-taskers who don't even realize that it is not a good idea to be on your hand-held device while you are driving seventy miles an hour?

Do you know that we have to pass laws nowadays forbidding driving and texting; that some people don't know on their own that it is not generally a good idea to shave or apply lipstick while you are driving?

In the 1960's researchers at Stanford University devised what was called, "the marshmallow test." It was written about extensively by Daniel Goleman in his landmark book, *Emotional Intelligence*.

One by one, four-year olds were brought into a testing room. A social worker placed a marshmallow in front of them and promised the children that if they refrained from eating the marshmallow until she returned twenty minutes later, the child could have another marshmallow. "It is your choice," she told the children. "You can eat the marshmallow now, or when I return I'll bring you another one, so you will have two."

To watch the children's reactions is hilarious and fascinating. You can see for yourself more recent versions of the test on YouTube. Some children grabbed the marshmallow immediately and consumed it greedily. Others were determined to wait. They tried to distract themselves. Some covered their eyes or put their heads down; other kids sang to themselves. You can see the mild torture that many of the children endured.

After the test scientists tracked the children's development. Researchers were astonished at what they found. By the time the children reached high school, those who as four-year-olds waited for the second marshmallow, grew up to be better adjusted, more popular, and higher-performing students than those who gave into temptation as four-year-olds.

The ones who ate the first marshmallow without waiting, tended to be less popular, more stubborn, more compulsive and more easily frustrated. They had a harder time dealing with stress and were reluctant to embrace new challenges. Their SAT scores were on average 210 points lower.

Something as basic as the ability to delay gratification as a four-year old turned out to be an important predictor of, and attribute for, later success.

Dr. Goleman related how he discussed top performance with the manager of a think tank of brilliant engineers. You would think that when it came to raw science that the top performers would be the ones who were the most brilliant. But as it turned out, those

who were the most accomplished were the ones whose e-mails got answered. They were the ones that colleagues liked and wanted to collaborate with and assist.

In your workplace, would you rather have a colleague who is an untrustworthy and unreliable genius or one of average intelligence who excels in loyalty, teamwork and discipline? Would you rather be married to a misogynist genius like Picasso, or a hard-working loyal spouse who paints in his spare time?

Who would you want running your bank: the one who was the smartest at the Wharton School, who effortlessly passed every test with flying colors; who could devise all kinds of financial schemes that no one else could understand: or the one who might have been in the middle of the class but is patient; who could sit still and focus without the constant need for more stimulation, more excitement and more profit; who would take the time to analyze deeply what is presented?

Who would you want in the foxhole with you: the one who knows all of the theories of war, or the one is the most resilient; the most imaginative, the most optimistic?

We have a tendency to put too much emphasis on sheer brilliance at the expense of refined wisdom. We define success too narrowly. *Chochmah* without *tevunah* – intelligence without wisdom - is like a sleek car without a road: all revved up and nowhere to go.

But even wisdom is not enough. We have plenty of smart people who are also emotionally intelligent. There are plenty of skillful and able politicians who sway the masses for ill rather than for good. There are plenty of brilliant scientists who design viruses intended to kill. There are plenty of gifted and emotionally intelligent lawyers who pervert justice. There are plenty of exceptional and courageous warriors who are terrorists.

We can think ourselves into practically anything. We can reason ourselves into the most unreasonable positions. Most of the evils of the world were not stumbled into; they were the product of thoughts reasoned out.

3. A Broad Heart – Rochav Lev

It is for this reason that God gave Solomon not only intelligence and not only wisdom, but also a broad heart; a good heart; an understanding heart. Solomon had this attribute in the most abundant quantity of all – *kachol asher al sefat hayam* – his heart was as broad as the sands on the seashore – practically limitless.

This is the quality that is most prized by God. This is the quality that will best advance the human creature. This is the quality that will safeguard us from evil and immorality. This is the quality that will temper the arrogance of our technological accomplishments and direct science towards service rather than servitude.

This is the quality that we have the least, and thus, it was given to King Solomon the most. And this is the quality – the cultivation and broadening of our heart – that we most contemplate on this day. On this day we seek to broaden our hearts.

Say to the House of Israel: I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you. I will remove the heart of stone from your body and give you a heart of flesh...

...To unlock the fetters of wickedness and untie the cords of bondage; to let the oppressed go free; to break off every yoke; to share your bread with the hungry and to take the poor into your home; and to clothe the naked.

Generosity, compassion, patience, humility, courage, altruism, honor, respect – these are the acts that are most inspiring. To discover the most complicated algorithm is exciting – and lucrative – and for some - even beautiful - but it cannot compare to the inspiration of the most simple act of selfless compassion.

All of us can have a broad heart. It is not dependent on intelligence; it is not measured by academic excellence; it is not the product of degrees. It is not restricted to the top wage earners or to the bottom wage earners.

We do not have to be geniuses to practice ethical behavior. Moral questions do not depend on mathematical proof. We know what is right and we know what is good. We are born with moral potential.

But we are not born with a broad heart. To activate our moral potential we must learn to be broad-hearted. Broad hearts do not just materialize. We must be taught to be good. We must practice being good.

Do we think that a child born with huge musical potential will grow up to excel in music without being taught? Do we think that a child with huge athletic potential will grow up to be a star without training? Do we think that a child with a high IQ will excel in academics without teachers?

So why do we think that ethics, morals, generosity, compassion, kindness, forgiveness – broad heartedness – can be instilled in us without instruction? The musician must learn how to produce music but the ethical person need not learn how to produce good deeds? The athlete must train to be first in the competition, but the moral person need not train to be first in goodness? The genius must learn to be placed on the dean's list but the broad-hearted one need not learn to be placed on the list of the righteous ones?

We do not train our children to be principled and idealists. We do not teach broad-heartedness in school. We teach practical skills. We teach value, not values.

Let's be honest with ourselves: What would we want more for our kids – that it is said about them that they have genius or that they are just; that they are rich or that they are righteous; that they are dominant or decent?

We think that the big ideas will somehow be absorbed by our children without instruction but that the little formulas need to be taught. We need a teacher to teach us mathematical calculus but moral calculus can be picked up by ourselves – that it will be absorbed by our children - perhaps through the air that we breathe.

We need a teacher to teach us about cells in the human body but knowledge of the soul can be picked up by ourselves – somehow it will be absorbed by our children – perhaps through the air that we breathe.

We need a teacher to teach us how to invest money but how to give money can be picked up by ourselves – somehow it will be absorbed by our children – perhaps through the air that we breathe.

We need a teacher to teach us about outer space but inner peace can be picked up by ourselves – somehow it will be absorbed by our children – perhaps through the air that we breathe.

One glance at the state of the world reveals our misplaced priorities. So many people in America have never had it so good and have never been so miserable. So many people in America have never been so educated and have never been so ignorant of what is really important. So many people in America have never prospered as much in the bounty left to us by past generations but have never been so miserly in sharing the bounty with others.

Medicine delivers a longer life to us: do we know how to live it?
Technology offers us more spare time: do we know how to use it?
Modernity creates more wealth: do we know how to spend it?
Invention produces more transportation: do we know where to go?
Science facilitates instant communication: do we know what to say?

We will not overcome the great challenges of society through science and technology alone. We will not manifest the best of ourselves through intelligence and wisdom alone. We must also learn broad-heartedness and train others in it.

And since we do not pick it up in school, we must find other outlets – like synagogues – to teach us not only how to distinguish between usefulness and waste, but between right and wrong. We must find other outlets – like our homes – to teach us how to distinguish – not only between productivity and inefficiency - but between good and bad.

People who grew up in good, honest and generous homes will, themselves, go out into the world practicing goodness. Those who grew up with wolves in the lair will,

themselves, be wolves on the street. Those whose parents were leaders in their synagogue, have grown up to lead our synagogue.

Every day we see evidence that wrong teaching is as bad as no teaching. Osama bin Laden is an engineer. His deputy, Ayman el Zahawiri is a surgeon. Khaled Mashal, the leader of Hamas, is a physicist.

Every day we see further evidence of the corruption of our world. Every day headlines testify to the poverty of values in our society. Every day we are flooded with proof of our selfishness; our narrow-mindedness; our emotional immaturity and our misplaced inversion of values. We are obsessed with celebrity and are strangely apathetic to suffering.

We follow the exploits of fallen athletes, politicians and actors twenty-four hours a day, but care nothing about the downfall of Man; the thousands who will die tonight from malnutrition or easily-preventable diseases; the millions in our own country who are jobless, prospect-less and helpless.

Every day we suffer the consequences, even those of us who consider ourselves successful and well off. We pay the price in broken homes, broken marriages and broken lives. Many of us might have affluence and professional status, but we are not happy and we are not fulfilled. We see the cream of American society spiritually starving; people who have reached the top but look for somewhere else to go – new gadgets, new games, new partners.

One of the distinctive risks of our day is that so many people no longer seem to believe in anything. The very attribute that the Bible thought was the most important – a broad heart – is considered by us to be the least important.

Micah spoke the truth: *Do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with your God.*

Jeremiah spoke the truth: *Let not the mighty man glory in his might. Glory only in mercy, justice and righteousness.*

Amos spoke the truth: *Let justice well up like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.*

Hosea spoke the truth: *I desire kindness.*

Akiva spoke the truth: *Love your neighbor as yourself; this is the central value.*

They spoke the truth because they realized that in the absence of something to believe in, people lose their way. They waste their lives. If we do not have something to believe in then life is just about naked materialism. And soon we discover that the more we have the more we want, and the more we want the more we need; and that we cannot escape this vicious cycle.

We need ideas to believe in. We need challenges in our lives; not only intellectual challenges, not only professional challenges and not only personal challenges.

Our highest humanity always leads to someone or something other than ourselves. The more we actualize our humanity the more we are led to serving others; helping others; loving others; believing in others.

The main purpose of life is the repair of the world: to unlock the fetters of wickedness and untie the cords of bondage; to let the oppressed go free; to break off every yoke; to share what we have with those in need. Our most inspirational moments are when someone helps us to peer into our own nature and to intuit the moral sentiment that lies at the core of the human creature.

And if we have seen this glorious sight; if we have looked into our very souls and have seen the spark that lies within; we will learn to like ourselves. We will inspire ourselves. We will acknowledge the beauty in ourselves. We will affirm and love life, an affirmation which, in turn, will encourage love of life in others.

And we will be better able to endure the disappointments of life because we will know that life has a purpose. We will suffer loss, sickness and disillusion. We will learn that life is unfair. We will see that sometimes the bad prosper and the good suffer.

And we will still march on, saddened but unbowed: because we believe.

We believe in ourselves; we believe in humanity; and we believe in the up-building of the world.