

“If I told you that you were going to be on Jeopardy, how would you prepare?”

You would read some trivia books and flip through a world atlas. (You might watch Ken Jennings in action, read up on all the Shakespeare you otherwise pretend to know when someone asks you, and do a deep dive into 80’s hair bands.)

If I told you that you were going to take a half-court shot at an NBA game for the chance to win 50,000 dollars, how would you prepare?

You would get a basketball, you would go to the YMCA (or the JCC) and you would practice chucking up half-court shots (until your arms fall off).”

If I told you that you were going to win a billion dollar Mega Millions jackpot, how would you prepare?

You would find a good accountant, a better lawyer, figure out how to un-list your cell phone number from your high school reunion directory, and call your rabbi to re-familiarize yourself with the biblical precept of tithing. Not necessarily in that order, I realize; feel free to start with me.

As Michael Schur, writer of hit shows like “The Office” and “The Good Place” discusses in a pretty great Ted talk<sup>1</sup>, it’s highly unlikely any of these things will happen. Even knowing it’s almost impossible, we spend lots of time daydreaming and mentally preparing for just such scenarios. And sometimes we need that escape, but wouldn’t it be better to spend our time preparing for something that’s more likely, more common, something we do every day?

As we begin the year 5783, we each need a little practice, a bit of a refresher course, on the experience of being human. Not because you don’t have a beautiful heart or a good *neshama* — God forbid; and who am I to cast aspersions — but because the forces and factors pressing against us seemingly from all sides have been subtly sapping us of our virtuous humanity.

Earlier this year, researchers Maferima Toure-Tiller and Lili Wang from Northwestern University and Zhejiang (pronounced: Zhuh-zhonga) University published a series of 10 peer-reviewed studies demonstrating that we make better, more virtuous decisions when presented with information on paper than in the digital space.<sup>2</sup> We are more likely to choose educationally or culturally enriching books when we hold a paper book list than when we scroll on Kindle; more likely to grant an impoverished child their material wish if we read it on paper than on our Androids; more likely to volunteer our time and donate our money; we are even more likely to make better health decisions when we hold a paper restaurant menu than when we scan a QR code or order online.

How could this be? MRIs of the human brain show that holding something physical — a simple piece of paper — helps a decision feel more real, more tangible, and consequential. The opposite is true in the digital space: it’s just pretend, we aren’t hurting anyone, it doesn’t even count, it’s not real we tell ourselves, and our brains believe it because it actually doesn’t register on an MRI. When interacting with physical material, the parts of our brain — the right retrosplenial cortex, the medial prefrontal cortex, the singulate cortex, all parts that deal with

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<sup>1</sup> Schur’s July 2022 talk “How ethics can help you make better decisions” was part of the genesis of this sermon. Listen here: [https://www.ted.com/talks/michael\\_schur\\_how\\_ethics\\_can\\_help\\_you\\_make\\_better\\_decisions/transcript](https://www.ted.com/talks/michael_schur_how_ethics_can_help_you_make_better_decisions/transcript)

<sup>2</sup> The Good-on-Paper Effect: How the Decision Context Influences Virtuous Behavior: [https://static1.squarespace.com/static/57b3ec9429687fab212bc6df/t/621a7eca7f99b33dfaecdff5/1645903564395/TW\\_The+good-on-paper+effect\\_MktgSci+2022.pdf](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/57b3ec9429687fab212bc6df/t/621a7eca7f99b33dfaecdff5/1645903564395/TW_The+good-on-paper+effect_MktgSci+2022.pdf)

the integration of emotional, visual, and spatial information<sup>3</sup> — activate in ways they simply do not when seeing virtual media...even when there are real world consequences to our actions. We have long known that forking over hard earned cash, literal dollar bills, makes us spend less than when we use credit cards and digital payments, and we now know that our decision making in the digital space struggles to live up to our highest values. If you have ever read the comments section of an online news story or interacted with a casual acquaintance over social media about anything that might, possibly, conceivably could be construed as political, you have already experienced how true this is. We are actually, demonstrably, not our best selves in the digital space: our brains quite literally aren't working the way we would expect.

Yet we live in an increasingly digital world. Zoom and Facebook and Instagram and TikTok and electronic medical records and paying bills online and direct deposit and online Torah Center registration and fundraising emails and QR codes at restaurants and ordering groceries online and... Houston, we have a problem. Our world is on a trajectory to be increasingly, perhaps fully virtual and it's leaving our humanity behind. It's why we need some practice at the mere act of being human. Unlike being on Jeopardy or hitting a half-court shot or winning the lottery, it's something we have the opportunity to do every day, so why not try to reclaim a bit of that virtuous humanity from the encroaching dehumanization of the digital world?

I'd encourage you to start small. An encouraging smile for someone who looks to be having a rough day. Go out of your way to say something kind to a friend, your kids, someone who you work with. Hold the door open for the next person into the restaurant even if it means they will get a table first. They are super small things ***you're probably already doing***, and each one makes us pause long enough to realize there is a fellow human being on the receiving end of the interaction. When you smile at someone, you will often see a smile in return. When you hold the door open or sympathize with someone equally inconvenienced you will see that our actions — all of our actions — affect other human beings. I want you, I want me, I want us to think of the wants and needs and feelings of other people so often that it becomes habitual and instinctive and impossible not to do even in the virtual space our brains pretend isn't real. Because it is real.

Lindy West, a columnist and author and critic, shared her experience of confronting a man who had been trolling her on the internet in the most horrendous way possible: opening accounts in the name of her deceased father to demean her in a way that would be more emotionally damaging. The comments were terrible and hurtful and jarring and Ms. West decided to share her pain publicly...which lead to her receiving the most unlikely of emails:

“Hey Lindy, I don't know why or even when I started trolling you....It was the lowest thing I had ever done...There is a living, breathing human being who is reading this [stuff]. I'm done being a troll...I made donation in memory of your dad...Again I apologize.”<sup>4</sup>

The process of reflection this man undertook — which we have to imagine is exceedingly rare among people pushing vitriol and vile in the digital space — led him to his “lightbulb” moment: Lindy West “is a living, breathing human being.” If you pinch her, she'll scream. If you poke her, she'll bleed. If you pretend to be her deceased father to harass her, she'll cry. No kidding, we should all be screaming: of course she's a real person. But that's not how our brains are wired. Things we would never write with a physical pen we type all the time; things we would never say to a person's face get expressed on Zoom calls. Our brains discount the virtual space and

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<sup>3</sup> Using Neuroscience to Understand the Role of Direct Mail. [https://static1.squarespace.com/static/58ee4bac414fb53d228c3532/t/5d30cff8e172f9000121e612/1563480057602/MillwardBrown\\_CaseStudy\\_Neuroscience.pdf](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/58ee4bac414fb53d228c3532/t/5d30cff8e172f9000121e612/1563480057602/MillwardBrown_CaseStudy_Neuroscience.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> This excerpt comes from <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2015/feb/02/what-happened-confronted-cruellest-troll-lindy-west>, and a more illuminating account can be found at <https://www.thisamericanlife.org/545/transcript>

we must fight to hold our virtuous humanity. Start small. Think of the wants and needs and feelings of other people so often that this choice becomes a habit becomes a nearly unconscious always-behavior that will emerge even in the virtual space. It's the first way we might practice the mere act of being human.

Second, we might do a bit of study. This is Michael Schur's point (remember him, creator of "The Good Place"?). When confronted with his own moral failure and lack of humanity, he started to study. To keep from making the same mistake again, to practice being human, Schur suggests we read theories of ethics to better understand "what they say, what they mean, how they purport to help us make better decisions and become better people." If Schur's point sounds very Jewish, it's likely because it is, because he is.<sup>5</sup> A central thread of his show — The Good Place, not The Office or Parks and Rec — is all about studying in order to benefit yourself, others, and the world around you.

It's fortunate we have an age-old tradition and source of wisdom literature upon which to draw. In Proverbs we read: "Do not devise harm against your fellow human beings...do not quarrel with them for no cause when they have done you no harm" (3:29-30); a texts thousands of years old that could have been written for Lindy West's troll. In Mishnah we read: "In a place where there are no human beings, strive to be one" (Avot 2:5); a text 1,800 years old that could have been written for reclaiming our virtuous humanity in the digital age. And in Torah and Talmud and Midrash and Responsa and Mussar we learn enduring lessons that transcend their time and impart essential wisdom about the act of being human in our time.

Let's use 5783 for some self-study as we practice being human. Struggle through Maimonides' Guide for the Perplexed or Eight Chapters or join us for Torah Study on Shabbat morning. Attend a class on Mussar, concrete instructions on how to live an ethical life, or read about Jewish business or legal or medial ethics. Study of our deep ethical tradition will help prepare us for the inevitable complications that arise from being human and help us make better decisions and be better people face-to-face and fingers-to-digital-device.

Finally, to practice being human in the new year we must renew our focus on that which we can control. When asked about how on earth one person can make a meaningful difference given the enormity and complexity of the world's challenges, Rabbi Doniel Hartman suggested that we narrow the scope to that which we can control. We can't end the war in Ukraine or improve the conditions for women in Afghanistan or feed every hungry person in Allegheny County. We can, however, tidy up our own little corner of the world, that within our sphere of influence: making ethical decisions even when it feels lonely, modeling through our actions and our words the kind of world in which we want to live, making differences where we can. It may not feel like enough with all of the injustice constantly swirling in 2022. But to be paralyzed by the enormity of a challenge isn't enough either.

"Ani v'atah nishaneh et ha'olam, az yavo'u k'var kulam," Israeli singer Arik Einstein sang. You and I will change the world, and then others will join us. They will follow along. "Ani v'atah n'naseh meihat'chalah:" we will start from the beginning, he says, start small. A smile, an act of kindness. The things you are already doing repeated again and again until our habit is unconscious and carries over into the increasingly digital world that our brain struggles to grasp is as real as the piece of paper you can hold in your hand. Study the age old wisdom now available at our fingertips, ironically thanks to that digital revolution, assessing and gleaning and preparing to better respond to the ethical challenges we as human face in our face-to-face interactions and with people we have to recognize are living, breathing human beings on the other side of the computer screen. Focus on changing that which is within our control, tangible actions we — each of us — can do regardless of what is swirling around us or imposed upon us. And make no mistake. Being decent, virtuous humans **is** our choice, even when our brains want to pretend it isn't so.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://forward.com/culture/437657/what-the-good-place-says-about-jewish-ethics/>

I hope you do make it on Jeopardy. I hope you do have a chance to make that half-court shot, though it's an even further dream in a city without a professional basketball team. I **really** hope you win the lottery jackpot and remember to give Temple a cut. We spend lots of time daydreaming and mentally preparing for just such scenarios because sometimes we need that escape. But most of all, I hope you spend 5783 preparing for something that's more likely, more common, something we do every day: strive to be human even in places where our brains don't believe we have to be. Our world is on a trajectory to be increasingly, perhaps fully virtual. We can't change the negative influences of that digital world on our humanity, but we can refuse to leave our virtuous humanity behind. Start small. Study. Focus on what you can control. Practice the mere act of being human. "Ani v'atah nishaneh et ha'olam - you and I will change the world."