

# “Bearing the Burden of the Other”

By Rabbi David Wolpe

What is our mission in this world? According to the mussar (ethical) tradition of Judaism it is to “bear the burden of the other.” In *A Responsible Life*, Rabbi Ira Stone explains both the mussar tradition and the teachings of the French Jewish philosopher Levinas. Rabbi Stone points out how much of our sense of self is shaped by what we do — and what we leave undone — for those around us.

Introspection is an important tool for understanding ourselves. Yet it is in deed, in response, that our essential selves are both shaped and shown. What you think of yourself is less revealing than how you treat me. As Levinas was fond of saying, the common phrase “after you” is the essential principle of ethical life.

Why are the great figures in Jewish tradition shepherds? Because caretaking, compassion and ethical awareness are the components of a good life. This simple truth is obscured by overemphasis on self-assertion, self-esteem and individual achievement. If we do not train ourselves and our children to bear the burden of the other, we will end up in social and moral collapse. The core teachings of the mussar tradition are not only beautiful and just, they are essential if we are to survive.