

“BETTER THAN ‘NOT BAD’”

“Walk before me and be blameless” says God to Abraham (Gen 17:1). This exhortation is given five chapters after God first summons Abraham to go forth out of Ur and become God’s representative on earth. Why must God command Abraham to goodness now? Was there something wrong with Abraham’s life to this point?

Up to now, writes Rabbi S. R. Hirsch, Abraham was indeed a good person, but more will be expected of him as an exemplary Jew. There is a genuine rigor to leading a moral life which most of us elide or dismiss. We are rationalizing creatures, and can always find a reason to relax standards when interfere with our desires.

Upon returning from exile, the Roman orator Cicero proclaimed in his address to the people: “There is less labor involved in rising superior to the wicked than in attaining to the level of the good.” Not being bad is a low level of moral achievement, essential but not adequate. Real goodness requires engagement, attention, and passion. Walking before God means anticipating what is to be done, not merely following what has been done. God is calling Abraham to rise above the standards of the society around him, above his conduct to this point, to a level that will inspire the ages.