

“Secret Goodness”

By Rabbi David Wolpe

How much better do we behave when someone is watching? Our morals, like our clothes, seem designed for display.

In *The House of Mirth*, Edith Wharton writes of one of her characters: “It would have been impossible for Mrs. Peniston to be heroic on a desert island.” Knowing others are looking spurs us to goodness, as the motorist who spots a camera at the corner brakes at the yellow light. Technology might help here: Perhaps a camera in every cellphone will lead to a viral outbreak of ethical behavior?

In the *Mishna*, Hillel declares, “In a place where there are no men, strive to be a man.” This is usually taken to mean that when other people are acting in an indifferent or cowardly fashion, one should stand up and be a mature, courageous human being. But it could also mean that one should act as a *mensch* — a decent person — when there are no others around, in a place where there literally are no men. God may be always watching but many of us care less for God’s good opinion than for that of our neighbors. So we may have to fall back on the old standby — strength of character, the kind of rock solid soul that would lead one to be heroic, even alone, on a desert island.