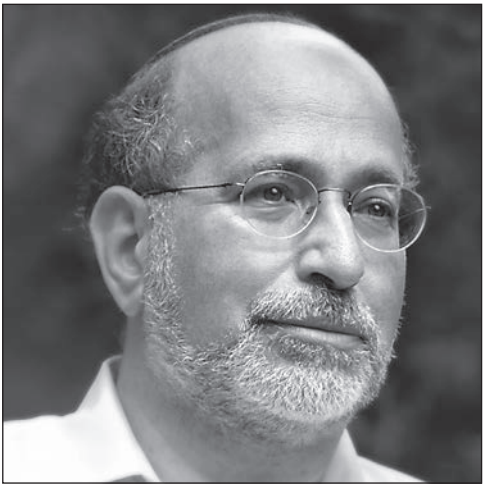
JOSEPH TELUSHKIN

by KEN GORDON



Rabbi Joseph Telushkin is on the phone. "Larry," says Telushkin, "I gotta get off. Somebody just came into my house." But Larry continues. And Telushkin waits. Politely.

Five minutes go by. Ten minutes. Phone to ear, Telushkin listens as he wanders the book-infested apartment that serves as his office, located on Manhattan's Upper West Side. Telushkin tries again. "Larry, I'm gonna have to get off," but Larry has Telushkin's attention and isn't about to relinquish it. One imagines that Telushkin spends a lot of time here listening to the dilemmas of friends, family, colleagues and acquaintances. When you're a renowned ethicist and Jewish-knowledge specialist, you probably get a healthy number of urgent phone calls. "Larry, I gotta get off," Telushkin says.

Eventually, he hangs up. And he doesn't say a word about Larry. He doesn't even sigh or emit an "oy." It's his first ethical lesson

of the day: an embodiment of the idea that we should avoid *lashon hara* (malicious gossip).

Ethical lessons are something Telushkin has devoted a great deal of time and effort to imparting. Whether through his books such as *A Code of Jewish Ethics, Volume 1: You Shall Be Holy*, recipient of the Jewish Book Council's 2006 Jewish Book of the Year Award, his lectures (*Talk* magazine named him one of the fifty best speakers in America), his efforts to create National Speak No Evil Day, his sermons, or even his Hollywood scripts, Telushkin's focus is to encourage people to improve their character. "God's central demand of human beings is to act ethically," he writes in *A Code of Jewish Ethics*.

Doing the right thing isn't so difficult, he explains – and that's his gift. In his hands, ethics aren't abstract and august. The premise of his *Book of Jewish Values: A Day by Day Guide to Ethical Living* (2000), which became the subject of a PBS special, is to make ethical awareness a part of our daily lives.

In terms of accessibility and ubiquity, you can't do much better than an online advice column, and Telushkin's done that, too. In the early 2000s, he spent two years writing "Everyday Ethics" for BeliefNet.com, an interfaith website. In the column, he explored the ethical ramifications of questions posed by readers who wanted to know everything from how to deal with pesky telemarketers to whether it's right for someone in need to receive a kidney from an executed Chinese prisoner. Telushkin's 2003 book, *The Ten Commandments of Character: Essential Advice for Living an Honorable, Ethical, Honest Life*, collects the best of the columns.

"Telushkin was a rare talent – both deep and accessible at the same time," recalls editor Steve Wauldman. Telushkin's column "was not just for Jews, by the way. You always had the sense he was drawing on the wisdom of the ages but he applied it to twenty-first-century dilemmas."

Telushkin, a Brooklyn native, wears a white T-shirt emblazoned with the letters NYC, black pants, black socks (no shoes), and, of course, a kippah. He has a scholar's soft body and inevitable beard. His informal appearance seems at odds with his impressive resume.

He's been a Jerusalem Fellow and sits on the board of the influential Jewish Book Council. To date, he has published fifteen books. His more well-known titles include *Biblical Literacy: The Most Important People, Events and Ideas of the Hebrew Bible* (1997), a Book-of-the-Month Club selection, and *Jewish Literacy: The Most Important Things to Know About the Jewish Religion, Its People and Its History* (1991), which his website reports is "the most widely selling book on Judaism of the past two decades."

Not all of Telushkin's writing is what you would expect of your typical rabbi. There's his series of Rabbi Daniel Winters mysteries and *Heaven's Witness*, the thriller he co-authored about reincarnation. Even more unexpected are his movie and television scripts. He co-wrote the screenplay for the Saul Rubinek film *The Quarrel* (1991) and has penned episodes of *Touched by an Angel*, *Boston Public* and *The Practice*.

In terms of rabbinic-Hollywood relations, Telushkin is probably in a category of his own. Since the early 1990s he has served as rabbi at the Los Angeles-based Synagogue of the Performing Arts, which he describes as "a very part-time congregation that meets the first Friday night of each month and Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur." Telushkin has cut back on his time there to the High Holidays and five services during the year.

What does it mean to be the rabbi for the Synagogue of the Performing Arts? Sometimes it means being privy to confessions that congregants might never tell a rabbi who wasn't also a writer. Take Kirk Douglas, for example, the impetus for a script Telushkin wrote. "Mr. Douglas had said to me, 'Before I die, I want to be in a movie in which I put on tefillin.' It was important for him to do."

The idea became "Bar Mitzvah," an episode from the 2000 season of *Touched by an Angel*. Douglas plays a secular man who owns a string of gyms, clashes with his son about faith, and in the end learns lessons about religion and about himself during his grandson's bar mitzvah preparation.

Asked if he incorporates ethical lessons into his fiction, Telushkin says, "I do. You know, I'm boringly consistent."

While the forms – television, Hollywood movies – are not the traditional platform for Jewish ethics, the marriage of ethics and storytelling is nothing new. "Morality has generally been taught in two ways: through binding legal rules and principles, and through stories. Both exert a profound effect…this is how Jewish tradition has long taught ethics," Telushkin writes in *A Code of Jewish Ethics*.

Telushkin makes liberal use of stories and anecdotes in *A Code of Jewish Ethics*, which he calls his life's work. It was called "a landmark work" by the *Jewish Week*, "the first major code of Jewish ethics to be written in English."

Why the focus on ethics? Telushkin's concern is that over time, Judaism has come to equate ritual observance with religion, with ethics being left out of the equation. "One of the sad things to happen to Jewish life in modernity is that the word 'religious' became associated in people's lives exclusively with ritual observance," says Telushkin. "So that when two Jews are speaking about a third and the question is raised, 'Is so-and-so religious?' He keeps kosher, he keeps Shabbat, he is or he doesn't or he's not, from which one could form the odd impression that in Judaism, ethics are an extracurricular activity."

His goal? "I want to restore ethics to its central place in Judaism," he told *Hadassah Magazine*.

This lack of respect for ethics means a lack of emphasis on kindness, he says. Kindness is sorely needed in our world, and should be one of our highest priorities. And he has an idea about how to nurture kindness, which will in turn influence our world for the better. How? It's simple – praise children for it.

"Parents should reserve the highest praise of their children for when their children perform kind acts," explains Telushkin, who with wife, author Dvorah Menashe Telushkin, has four children. He says that parents praise their children for academic, athletic and/or cultural achievements, and sometimes even for good looks, but rarely if ever for their kindness. "If children got their highest praise for when they performed kind acts, we'd raise a generation of people who most liked themselves when they were doing kind things.

It would have the capacity down the road to elevate Jewish life and American life."

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Telushkin was born in 1948 and raised in a modern Orthodox family. He credits his family with having a strong influence on his life. "I was very deeply affected by my grandfather and my father," he says. "My grandfather was a rabbi in Brooklyn for many years. His first name was Nissan, like the month during which Pesach falls. He was a big scholar, he wrote books. He lived until I was twenty-one, and we learned together. And my father, Shlomo, also had a great effect on me. They were both people who were deeply pious Jews but very much into the tradition of the emphasis on Jewish ethics."

His late mother was also an influence, in a different way. If his grandfather and father (who was also a rabbi, although his career was as an accountant) helped shape the scholar he was to become, his mother played a role in fashioning the dynamic speaker and entertaining writer. She was "a very clear speaker; my mother was very humorous," Telushkin says. She had "an impact on my speaking style. My father was a wonderful person, but not as funny."

Telushkin attended the Yeshiva of Flatbush where he had an academic career that was, to put it charitably, undistinguished. "I was a *terrible* student at school," he says, admitting he graduated in the bottom quarter of his class. But the yeshiva had its good points. The school taught him Hebrew and gave him "a very voluble sense that here's an active Judaism, you can be part of the world, part of the Jewish people, and very Zionist, very bound up with Israel." It also introduced him to fellow student and future collaborator Dennis Prager. "Dennis was an even worse student than me," says Telushkin.

Telushkin didn't grow up planning to be a rabbi; although it was always a possibility, he was more interested in writing, and in college he also became interested in law. "I realized that Judaism was such a passion for me that if I chose another profession, that would be my vocation and Judaism would be my avocation, so there was an advantage to being a rabbi," he told the *Atlanta Jewish Times*.

He attended New York's Yeshiva University for both college and rabbinical school.

While at Yeshiva University in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Telushkin became involved in the movement to get Jews out of Soviet Russia. So did his friend Prager, who now hosts a nationally syndicated radio talk show and is the author of several books, some in collaboration with Telushkin, including their first book, the widely popular *Eight Questions People Ask About Judaism* (1977).

That book developed in a roundabout way, out of other work they were involved in. "I was the co-president of the Student Struggle for Soviet Jewry," Telushkin says. "At around the same time, Dennis was doing the same thing for the Russian Jewry movement. He had gone to Russia, and was one of the early Jews to meet with the *refuseniks*, and he came out and became a very galvanizing force."

As Telushkin recalls, he and Prager were both giving frequent talks and Prager was struck by the fact that many of the questions people asked, apart from the issues of Soviet Jewry, were very similar. Regardless of whether the questions were from Reform Jews, Orthodox Jews, or members of Hadassah, the things they wanted to know were the same. The two, only twenty-four years old at the time, sat down and made a list of frequently asked questions, which they further developed into the book, *Eight Questions People Ask About Judaism.*

Within six years, *Eight Questions* sold over thirty thousand copies. Telushkin was enrolled in graduate school in history at Columbia and was close to receiving his doctorate, but as the book became a popular success he grew convinced of the power of writing and devoted more time to it. Originally self-published, he and Prager updated the book and added another question, "Is there a difference between anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism?" and Simon and Schuster published it in 1981 as *Nine Questions People Ask About Judaism.*

"The book could not have been written by one of us alone," says Prager. "We were certain that if Joseph had written the book, it would have been nine hundred pages of stories; and if I had written the book, it would have been a fifty-page outline of ideas."

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Clearly, Telushkin's natural inclination is to instruct through stories. But he teaches in other ways as well. In addition to all the ways he has found to tell stories that impart ethics, he also conveys ethics through example.

"To me, writing these books on ethics has obviously made me more conscious of my own behavior, and I watch myself more carefully," he says.

"Joseph is incredibly compassionate, first to those around him and also to those he does not know," says Ari L. Goldman, Telushkin's friend, a professor at the Columbia School of Journalism and a former *New York Times* religion writer. "If someone is out of work, he tries to find them a job. If they have a job, he tries to find them a better one. He has helped me with numerous writing projects.

"And now for the people he doesn't know: We live in Manhattan, a place of much noise and many ambulances. If an ambulance goes by with the siren wailing, most people will stop talking and impatiently wait for it to go by. But when Joseph hears a siren, he whispers a prayer: '*Kel nah, refah nah lah.*' That is the prayer that Moses said for his sister, 'God, please heal her.' Moses said it for his sister; Joseph says it for total strangers."

He prays for strangers, and in many ways he prizes his writing for its ability to help him connect to strangers. His work speaks to Jews of all stripes. "There is not a typical reader of my books," he says. "I am as apt to get questions from people in the right wing of the Orthodox world, to people in left-wing Reform, to non-Jews. I think I've managed to isolate Jewish teachings for the human condition."

"No one I know has done more to make Judaism accessible to a wide audience," says Goldman, who sits near Telushkin at Ramath Orah, the modern Orthodox shul they both attend in Manhattan. "His book, *Jewish Literacy*, put our traditions in the hands and hearts of so many people. It is a book that says this is a long and sacred tradition – and it can be meaningful in your life. He writes with joy and clarity."

Telushkin's gift for writing and his passion for ethics came together in 1996, when he dreamed up the idea for a day in which all

Americans refrained from indulging in lashon hara. He pitched the concept to Connecticut senator Joseph Lieberman and Florida senator Connie Mack, who approved the idea and, to Telushkin's surprise, asked him to write up the resolution for what became Senate Resolution #151, National Speak No Evil Day. Alas, the bill failed to pass.

America, it seems, still has a long way to go when it comes to embracing ethics in everyday life. Not many would pass Telushkin's ethical test of going twenty-four hours without uttering an unkind word.

Why is Telushkin so against evil speech? It has to do with the power of words, and the responsibility of wordslingers. As he writes in *Words That Hurt, Words That Heal*: "That words are powerful may seem obvious, but the fact is that most of us, most of the time, use them lightly. We choose our clothes more carefully than we choose our words, though what we say *about* and *to* others can define them indelibly. That is why ethical speech – speaking fairly of others, honestly about ourselves and carefully to everyone – is so important. If we keep the power of words in the foreground of our consciousness, we will handle them as carefully as we would a loaded gun."

If Telushkin was disappointed by the failure of Resolution #151, it has hardly slowed him down. His goal continues to be "to try and express my writing through as many different forms as possible."

And yet, despite all the books, and despite the larger audience reached through television, film and the Internet, Telushkin sees much still to be done. He is at work on the second volume of *A Code of Jewish Ethics*. Subtitled *Love Your Neighbor as Yourself*, it focuses on ethical situations within the workplace and within our communities. After that he'll produce volume three, dealing with ethical issues closer to home, indeed within the home – showing how moral acts deepen our relationships with those we love most – family.

"My work is very much trying to teach the sort of life I should lead and others should lead," he explains. His life is his work, and his work is being a Jewish ethical teacher *par excellence*, a vocation that comes in many forms. Whether it's on the page, at the podium, on

the screen or on the phone, chances are good that he's saying something that can help make you a better person or this world a better place. Listen closely.