

## Kol Ha-Rav

When I first studied about Buddhism in college, I was struck by how similar the story of Buddha's early life seemed to the story of Moses. But, of course, with some important differences.

Buddha was the son of a king, and grew up in the palace. His father had heard a prophecy that if his son experienced any suffering, he would discard his opportunity to be a ruler and instead become a religious leader. And, in fact, one day Buddha ventures out of the palace walls and sees – all for the first time – a poor man, a sick man, a dead man, and a monk. This experience first makes him aware of how distant his existence in the palace had been from your typical human existence. He becomes driven to find the way to relieve humanity of that suffering. Those who have studied Buddhism know that his way is recognizing that all temporal phenomena are illusion, and one can learn to transcend one's inevitable suffering by realizing that it is not part of one's ultimate reality.

But then again, it's the differences in the stories which help to highlight what is most distinctive about each religious tradition. The essential difference is in the kind of liberation that each leader seeks to achieve. Buddha's experience taught him that there must be a way for every human being to transcend his or her circumstances, no matter how terrible they are. But it's primarily an otherworldly liberation. We liberate ourselves from the world by recognizing that all temporal phenomena are an illusion.

Whereas when Moses sees injustice, he does not try to transcend it or to understand it as illusion – he simply tries to overcome it.

To paraphrase the words of the great 19<sup>th</sup> century Jewish sage Rabbi Israel Salanter, the founder of the Mussar movement, a movement of vast ethical concern (and the subject of a new adult education offering): "There are some people who think that spirituality is being concerned with the welfare of other people's souls. But in Judaism, spirituality is being concerned with the welfare of your *own* soul – and the welfare of other people's bodies.

Join us this fall as we explore the many themes of this remarkable revival in Jewish ethical life.

*Rabbi Jonathan Z. Maltzman*