

# THE CIVIL SOCIETY PLAYBOOK

*A commonsense plan for a return to civility*

Michael Benedict



New York, New York

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## DEDICATION

*In loving memory of my father,  
James Vernon Benedict, PhD, MD*

*For Mom and Rich, with my most profound  
gratitude for your unwavering love and support in  
all aspects of my life.*

# The Civil Society Playbook

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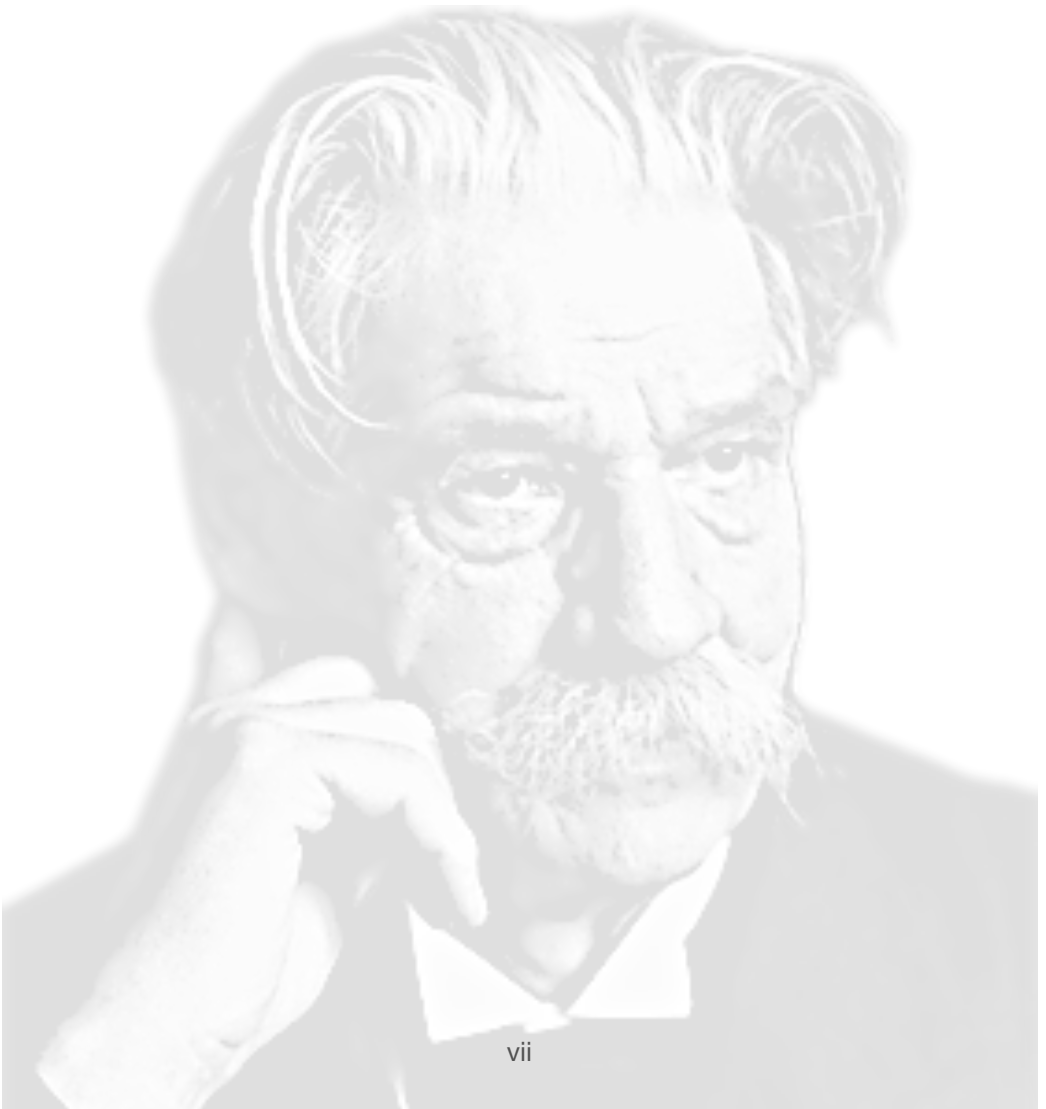
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“THE DISINTEGRATION OF SOCIETY BEGINS  
WITH THE DECAY OF INDIVIDUAL CHARACTER.”

—ALBERT SCHWEITZER, THEOLOGIAN



# The Civil Society Playbook



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Bill Rubacky  
Brian Scoles



## FOREWORD



first heard the name Michael Benedict as it emerged from the lips of Ezra Berenholz, director of development of Boys Town Jerusalem (BTJ), an organization I had the honor of heading for more than three decades.

“This is someone you should meet,” Ezra began insisting in the early 2010’s. “Michael is a *ger tzedek* (convert to Judaism) who wanted to do something positive and found us on the internet.” Ezra explained that Michael had not only been financially supportive, he was also a marketing maven who was providing us with some outstanding guidelines and promotional material... all pro bono!

In case you’re not familiar with BTJ, it is an extraordinary school for disadvantaged boys and young men. Boasting an enrollment of about one thousand, BTJ is located in Jerusalem’s *Bayit Vegan* neighborhood. It consists of a junior high and a high school plus a two-year College of Applied Engineering. The school’s students trace their roots from all over the diaspora: France, Iran, Iraq, Yemen, Morocco, Russia, and many other nations. BTJ transforms the lives of these young men, who come from limited backgrounds, by providing them with limitless futures. The boys’ families are typically struggling for various reasons such as religious persecution, combat or civil strife, or even famine. The school provides housing, three meals a day and extensive extracurricular activities. It boasts a *Bagrut* passage rate (a state-administered high school proficiency exam) far above the Israeli national average. BTJ also provides its students with needed clothing, bus fare, personal support, and something even more precious: hope for the future.

As head of BTJ’s operations in the U.S., I administered a program that saw American donors provide scholarships for individual students in need. Michael, I was aware, had underwritten several such generous scholarships. I informed Ezra that I wished to meet the man in order to express my personal thanks.

Ezra and Michael had developed a friendship over time and they met regularly for lunch several times a year. In 2015, Ezra suggested I join them and I readily agreed. After pleasantries were exchanged, I listened as Michael explained the reasons behind his support. They had to do with the Jewish concept of *tzedakah*. Most people conflate that term with the English word, charity, but Michael understood the difference. While charity falls under the rubric of financial support and good deeds and is carried out voluntarily, *tzedakah* is a Torah-mandated comprehensive obligation that *requires* Jews to offer assistance whenever it is needed.

“This fellow really gets it,” I thought to myself and decided I had heard enough.

“How would you like to serve on our Board of Directors?” I proposed, not sure how Michael would react to such an unexpected invitation. He agreed in a heartbeat.

Once on the Board, Michael became an articulate and impassioned voice at our regular meetings. In addition to our encounters in the boardroom, Michael and I would often chat by phone. It was in this way that I learned about his dedication to doing what he termed “the right and good thing.”

A few times each year, depending on our respective schedules, Michael would make the 65-mile drive down the Garden State Parkway from his home in Jersey City to our offices in Lakewood, New Jersey. He would arrive armed with questions about Jewish customs, laws and traditions and I was pleased to serve as his mentor. I would then update Michael on BTJ’s activities and share our latest fundraising initiatives. He would invariably offer not only financial support but also positive and constructive feedback. And then we would break for a *milchik* (dairy) lunch at Ottimo’s Cafe.

Michael shares my love of certain desserts, and so it was, in July of 2023, as we were consuming the last few bites of Otti-

## Foreword

mo's famous cheesecake that I asked how Michael's work was going. He said all was well and then proceeded to share a secret.

"I haven't told this to anyone, yet," he confided, "but I'm writing a book." He went on to explain that the book, titled "The Civil Society Playbook," was his blueprint for a proactive program intended to restore our ravaged society back towards a state of civility. While much of it was based on Jewish teachings, the book's readership would be the general public.

I asked Michael if he had a publisher and he replied that he was seeking one. I was pleased to be able to direct him to a Florida-based producer of primarily personal memoir books. I had referred others to Peter Weisz Publishing in the past and all reported excellent outcomes. I wasn't sure if Peter published books of the type Michael was writing, but I urged Michael to get in touch. He did so and I'm pleased to report that you are holding in your hands the product of that "*shiddach*" (matrimonial match).

I am indeed grateful to Michael for several reasons. Firstly, I deeply appreciate his personal friendship over the years and the "*kavod*" (honor) of being asked to provide this Foreword. But, most importantly I am indebted to Michael—as we all should be—for his courage and dedication in seeking to bring about a more civil and sympathetic society. Too many of us complain about the coarseness and crassness of modern life. Too few do as Michael has done in this book and proffer concrete common-sense direction on how to translate those concerns into action.

To paraphrase the words found on the gravestone of the Kotzker Rebbe, I applaud Michael for proclaiming:

"I do not want readers who are righteous, rather I want readers who are too busy doing good that they won't have time to do bad."

—Rabbi Ronald Gray  
Executive Director Emeritus  
Boys Town Jerusalem Foundation of America  
December 2023

# The Civil Society Playbook

## INTRODUCTION



merica is a fascinating historical experiment, with citizens from every country, speaking 350+ languages<sup>1</sup>, and representing every major religion. It is an intricate amalgamation that has built a relatively young nation into a formidable economic, political, and social power.

For such a unique society to continue to thrive, however, there must be civility, respect for our differences, and a baseline value system to sustain it. Well into the 21st century, however, Americans are struggling to be civil to one another, and this is one of the greatest threats our nation faces.

I love my country. Yet I frequently hear people of all ages commenting on the decline of civility in society. The endless narcissism, the deafening advertising encouraging us to buy more and more, business leaders who seem indifferent toward the staggering growth in income inequality, and the apathy of political leaders toward property and hate crimes.

All of these elements contribute to the weakening of civility in society.

## **How did we get here?**

I have been in business-to-business (B2B) marketing for the last twenty-eight years. Marketing teaches one the importance of nuanced, multifaceted observation, data analysis, and strategy development. As a discipline, marketing evolves daily and demands that one stay abreast of the digital media landscape, societal trends, politics, industry segment trends, competitors, and so much more.

It teaches you that there are no easy answers, requires one to make sense of a lot of information and data, and act accordingly. It can also make one a keen and full-time observer of society.

Within the last decade or so, I have observed this growing coarseness and vulgarity in society—a toxic mix of an obsessive focus on the self in social media, a sense of entitlement, disrespect for boundaries and private property, and intolerance toward ideas—and even people—that do not fit a pre-approved discourse. These situations manifest themselves in seemingly insignificant actions and attitudes to more in-your-face occurrences. They run counter to what we intuitively sense is right and good. When they occur with enough regularity, they accumulate and begin to gnaw at our sense of decency and justice.

For example, some friends and I were in a high-end men's clothing store in Manhattan's SoHo district. While browsing, we saw a man take a jacket off the rack and leave the store



without paying. Worse, he walked past security, who didn't even make an attempt to stop him. This is the "new norm" in cities and states that have implemented "bail reform," which allows criminals to steal with little to no consequences. In a different situation, the synagogue I belong to needs armed security personnel to deter would-be assassins and vandals during the High Holidays of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. This adds a not-inconsiderable expense to our nonprofit's budget, which could be going to education programs.

Societal decline has been exacerbated by the relentless focus on the self: Me, Myself, and I. Social media encourages us to find new ways to differentiate ourselves and to push boundaries on what we post in order to drive responses. We do what is necessary to achieve this by dramatically amplifying the negative and grossly over-exaggerating the positive. We do it to drive "engagement" through likes, comments, and shares to give us an endorphin rush. Being noticed is a fundamental aspect of the human condition. Still, before mobile devices and social media, one could be unpopular, and few were the wiser. Now, if you post a picture of yourself, you risk unflattering comments and few likes, while a friend gets a hundred likes and raving comments.

The business world is trying to be moral, but not in the traditional sense. The prestigious publication, The Financial Times, has a section called Moral Money, which focuses on ESG (environmental, social, and governance) issues and updates. The goals of ESG are noteworthy in their ability to get

organizations and their employees to think more broadly about their impact on various issues. However, serious moral challenges remain, including the ever-expanding gap in pay between CEOs and the average worker. CEOs take an ever-greater share of their company's, shareholders', and society's total wealth for themselves—withholding it from the workers.

Language, one's most powerful tool, is focused on dismissing and attacking others. If one doesn't kowtow to others' beliefs, points of view, or how they identify themselves, they will label that person unflatteringly and “cancel” them. They don't want to hear anything other than what makes them feel safe. Liberal thinking, in the classical sense, where one listens to all sides of an issue, is, to put it charitably, on hold at the moment.

Persons of faith, Asians, and the elderly are targeted based solely on their affiliation, race, and age: Individuals are assaulted. Businesses and places of worship are robbed and vandalized. Authorities make gestures of support for victims while ensuring those committing crimes are protected with few, if any, consequences.

This societal decline is broadly impacting the most vulnerable and making us less generous. A recent Giving USA study found that charitable giving fell by 3.4% in 2022 to \$499.3 billion—a 10.5% decrease when adjusted for inflation.<sup>2</sup> In 2003, 66% of Americans donated to charity. In 2022, less than 50% did.<sup>3</sup>

Charitable giving is being impacted, to a degree, by the significant concentration of wealth in the top 1% of income earners. Still, why are average Americans not donating? Have we looked at our discretionary income and asked where we might cut back to give to those who are in more challenging circumstances?

While all this sounds discouraging, we are not powerless as individuals to challenge these prevailing norms. In short, to show “another way” of approaching civil behavior. And while political, business, religious, and academic leaders have a responsibility to restore social standards, we, as individuals, must also act. But first, we need to relearn what a civil society looks like, and how to get there.

## **Empathy in action**

I’ve spent considerable time researching examples of incivility in our society to try to get to the heart of what’s happening and where we might go from here. But I’m not the first to make these kinds of observations. Some might naturally ask, what makes you qualified to write about this topic? It is a fair question, and the answer lies with my father, my mother, and my faith.

My parents strongly influenced me. They taught me so much about caring for others—the beauty of individual behavior and its potential impact. Here are some examples: As a physician, my father worked in agricultural and industrial med-

icine in one of the (then) poorer counties in South Texas. Dad would spend a lot of time with his patients, teaching me that a physician cannot just treat the patient's symptoms—they must dig deeper, understand what is happening in that patient's life, and help them with both personal and health problems to facilitate proper healing. This takes time and empathy.

On a typical day, Dad would see numerous patients. He would then start his rounds at the hospital. This being South Texas, a number of his patients were Hispanic. This can pose a challenge to a doctor. When he or she enters the patient's room, two to three generations of a family can be present. Doctors have a choice—they can address the patient directly, make minimum pleasantries to the family and move on, or, as Dad would do, listen to the family's questions and patiently answer them before moving on to the next patient.

The result of this approach was a meaningful experience for the patients, but it also meant that when my father finally arrived home, our family would frequently eat dinner around 10:00 p.m. As a young teenager, I sometimes resented the amount of time he spent at the hospital. It was impossible for us to go out to dinner and not run into one of his patients or hospital colleagues, which meant more of his time was devoted to them. It wasn't until I was a bit older that I appreciated what he was doing. He wanted his patients to know he genuinely cared about them and wanted to help.

This approach went beyond his patients; he also tried to know the custodial and security staff in the medical buildings.

He would greet them, ask them about their lives, thank them—and remember what each person told him so he could pick up the conversation where they left off.

Being empathic takes a lot of personal energy and can take a broader toll—on yourself and those around you. But when you care—authentically care—you are setting a different tone in society—people feel it and are changed by it. You’ve just raised the bar for what human interactions can be.

My parents also cared for their elderly parents and other family members’ financial, emotional, and health needs. They were there for them, whether it was to help pay rent or unexpected expenses. They would also travel to their hometown to visit relatives and meet with their doctors, if necessary.

Leading by their actions, Mom and Dad instilled in my brother and me a sense of collective responsibility for those around us—family members and beyond. It was, therefore, natural to carry on what they taught. However, I took it in a slightly different direction. Most of the actions are similar, but the intent is different. My parents were not very religious, and we attended Mass mostly on Easter and Christmas.

On the other hand, I was naturally drawn to God starting around age 10. At age 40, I converted to Judaism. Judaism teaches us many things, but two concepts that are always prevalent in my mind and that drive most of what I do, including this book, are:

- Treat others the way you want to be treated.
- Feel the pain of the world—and do something about it.

## **Society needs a playbook**

When this book was being drafted, I shared the manuscript in its various stages with a diverse group of people—those from different age cohorts (from early 20s to late 80s), those with different religious faiths (and ones with no faith affiliation), and those with different political viewpoints. The one consistent feedback I received from them was that in order to restore civility, society needs a “playbook.” There is a hunger for civility. We want to give of ourselves, and we want people to think of us when we’re in need.

Civility refers to the courteous and respectful behavior that individuals show toward others in social interactions. It is an affirmation that the problems of some are the problems of all, that a good society presupposes collective responsibility, that there is a moral dimension to being part of this nation, this people, this place.<sup>4</sup>

According to a recent American Bar Association (ABA) survey:

85% of Americans surveyed said civility today is worse than ten years ago.

90% said parents and families are most responsible for instilling civility in children.

On a personal level, when I observe incivility in American society, I feel compelled to offset it with actions that counter the prevailing mindset; for example, being charitable, caring for the elderly, listening to those who need an empathic ear, and being polite.

There are 334 million Americans. As a group, we have an enormous capacity to demonstrate a better way to interact with and help each other through our actions and words.

This book does not touch upon public and private policy solutions to incivility. This is by design. As individuals, we witness in our everyday lives the powerful impact of taking personal initiative to change our lives—exercising, studying more, eating healthier, participating in a 12-step program, updating our skill sets, volunteering, and much more. That same effect happens when we also expend our focus on others through the lens of right and good.

### **What is Right and Good?**

I penned this book to highlight some of our society's more significant issues based on personal observations of America's social, economic, and cultural components. I then developed the Right and Good Framework, which provides detailed actions individuals can take to enhance civility.

For inspiration into solutions, I consulted great thinkers (current and past), religious texts, and each generational cohort (Silent Generation to Gen Z).

But why call it Right and Good?

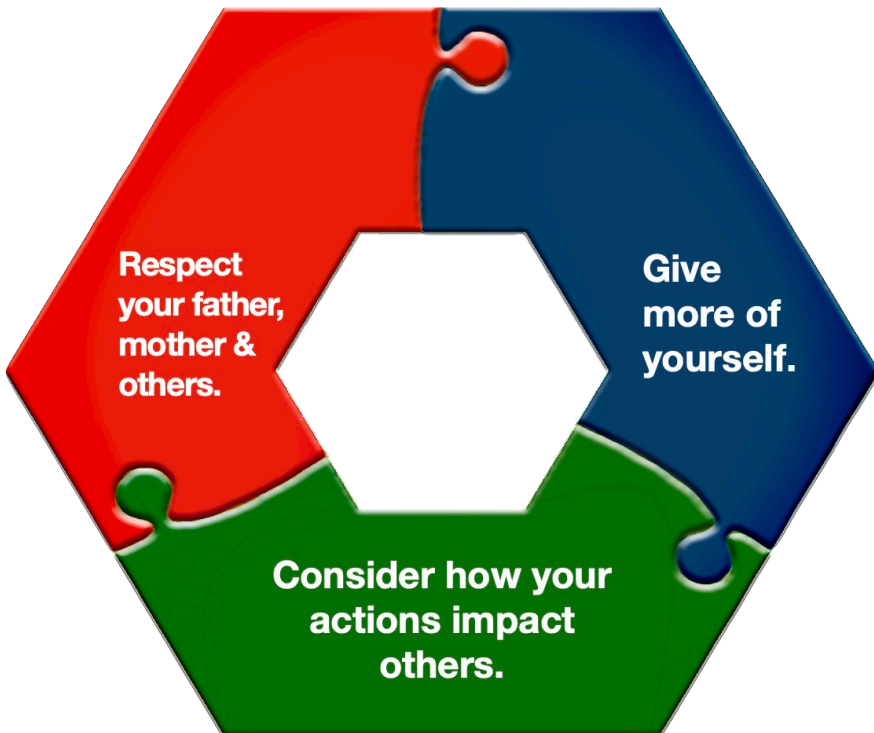
“Right” refers to actions that adhere to a set of rules, principles, or moral standards. It means following societal norms, laws, or ethical codes. Examples of Right include donating to

charity, caring for your parents, and forgiving others who hurt you.

“Good” refers to beneficial, positive, and morally commendable actions. It involves evaluating those actions based on their impact on other individuals, communities, or society as a whole. Examples include holding the door for an elderly person, saying “please” and “thank you” when going through a drive-thru, and participating in an Earth Day cleanup.

I have distilled these principles into a high-level snapshot of the Right and Good (RnG) Framework.

For our society to become more civil, there are three behaviors we can perform each day, as illustrated here:





There are three major codes of behavior in the Right and Good Framework. These codes include:

- 1. Respect your father, mother, and others**
- 2. Give more of yourself**
- 3. Consider how your actions impact others**

*Why these three components?*

Civility begins in the home. How we treat our immediate and extended family will dictate how we treat our fellow students, colleagues, and strangers. That is why this is the number one behavior upon which to focus.

When we give of ourselves to others' needs—being there for a friend who has had a rough day, giving money to the homeless woman on the street—we ease the pain of the world.

Finally, we need to consider the broader implications of our actions. For example, playing our music loudly while driving a car with the windows down may be enjoyable, but people on the sidewalk, and those stopped alongside you, probably don't want to hear your music.

These top-level codes underpin the entire RnG Framework detailed throughout this book and are covered in full near the end of the book.

## **Book at a glance**

This book is divided into the following sections. It starts with understanding why society has become more uncivil, then segues into the Framework with specific ideas on how we each can turn the tide and make society more civil.

### **Part 1: Society's Challenges**

- Endless Focus on Me, Myself, and I
- Too Much Is Never Enough
- Destructive Crime
- The Targeted and Alienated
- Moral Relativism
- The Collective Impact of Incivility

Each chapter in Part 1 ends with a section called RnG Actions with a focus on proactive ways we might embody Right and Good in what we say and do. There is also an Inspiration section highlighting ways that proactive people are counteracting incivility in society with Right and Good measures.

### **Part 2: Actionable Solutions**

- Rethinking Our Purpose
- The RnG Framework
- Change Starts with the Individual

I believe that if we don't start implementing a framework of Right and Good, to whatever extent possible, society will continue to deteriorate to our collective detriment. This endeavor requires all of us to contribute if we want to make a difference.