

SERVE YOU IN TRUTH Kol Nidre 2018

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Yom Kippur begins with this unusual act of declaring our vows to be null and void. We build in an escape clause for any vows--*Mi yom kippuri zeh ad yom hakippurim ha ba aieinu l'tovah*--From this Yom Kippur to the next

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which we might make but be unable to fulfill.

Why would we want to do this? Because we are aware of the things we have undertaken to do in the past , but were not able to fulfill. There is a sense of sadness and perhaps confusion and perhaps resignation to this effort. Why are we still in this place again? Why did we, just a few moments ago, beat our breasts in contrition over some of the same things that we regretted last year?

Perhaps for some of us it is a matter of will-power , of lack of follow-through, or laziness, or even of stubbornness. But certainly a part of it is our inability to be a true judge of ourselves. Our inability to understand what is going on in our hearts, or tell or to admit certain truths about ourselves.

I would like to share some thoughts tonight about why it is so difficult to see the truth about ourselves, even if we make an earnest effort, and to share some teaching from our tradition and outside of it that I hope will touch our hearts and be helpful.

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I recently read a piece from the New York Times describing the methods they use for verifying whether an “eyewitness” video is truthful or not. It is pretty extensive:

First, they determine whether a video is really new. Second, they dissect every frame to draw conclusions about location, date and time, the actors involved and what exactly happened. Then they try to establish the provenance of each video — who filmed it and why — and ask for permission to use it. In the perfect scenario, this involves obtaining the original video file or finding the first version of the video shared online,

vetting the uploader's digital footprint and contacting the person — if it's safe to do so .

Then they examine, frame by frame, looking for landmarks such as mosques, bridges or even geographic features such as mountains or rivers. They match these up with satellite images, street views and geotagged photographs to determine the approximate or exact location of an event

They use historical weather data to detect inconsistencies in a video, and then something called shadow analysis: there is a tool that can tell them, by the length of the shadows, whether an event happened around noon or 5 PM. Finally, we take a close look at what else is visible in a video: details on official insignia or military equipment. In one video showing a US soldier firing a weapon into the driver's window of a civilian truck, the team was able to identify the exact model of the shotgun and of the vehicle, which turned out to be consistent with equipment used by U.S. Special Forces in Afghanistan.

PRETTY IMPRESSIVE! If only we had such precision tools to read our own thoughts, to determine the motives of others who speak or act toward us, or to determining the effects of our own actions on others! A shadow detector, to uncover the slight shadings --what is covered, what is being said—in the interactions we have with one another. And provenance: what do we actually “know” about another person or situation. But we don't. And anyways, discerning truth outside of ourselves and inside are two slightly different propositions, and it might be useful to clarify the differences

The quest for truth outside of ourselves is complicated. Not just because much of what we want to understand especially in the hard sciences –is complicated. And even more so in the social sciences, like politics and history, where the lens we bring to describing things shapes what we believe is true . I have lived long enough to see these paradigms shift and change more than once in my lifetime. Finding the absolute truth in these things is perhaps an impossible task.

Fortunately our Torah does not command us to find the truth. But it gives us some practical advice which is easier to follow. In Exodus 23:7 we are commanded:

MI DVAR SHEKER TIRCHAK KEEP FAR FROM A FALSE MATTER

I began to feel the need to practice this, especially when listening to the news. But perhaps not in the way you are thinking. The practice of keeping far from a false matter is not difficult at all when a person actually **lies or misstates** the facts. These things can be easily pointed out and there is **no difficulty** in knowing how to think about them.

But it is a little more difficult in those situations where we are in murkier territory. On the afternoon of August 12 last year, after experiencing all that we experienced here, seeing so many sights and trying to put it all together, I found myself back at home around 6 PM. My daughter Tamar was in town, watching our dog Sacha, and I felt the need to go out and sit somewhere with her: just to have a glass of wine.

We went and sat in a large restaurant, where there were 4 huge TV screens, tuned to 4 different stations. On every station there were 2 or 3 people sitting around and talking –about **Charlottesville!!** Sitting in Washington or New York, speaking with great confidence, offering commentary on what had happened in our streets only a few hours ago. I thought to myself: REALLY?? I was here, on those streets. I myself did not have a grasp on all that had taken place--how did it happen? What led to what? And yet, here they were, all talking on quite confidently about Charlottesville.

Since that time, I have been a little more careful about what I allow into my head space. Very often (tell me if this is your experience) a radio show or TV show will begin with some fact, something that has been said, or that has happened. But about two or three minutes in, the conversation shifts to questions and answers that are pure speculation, moving seamlessly from fact to opinion, from fact to faction, linking together unrelated ideas, subjects that are not related directly to the issue in question in the attempt to shape a narrative.

At moments like these, I am now more likely to turn off the show or walk out of the room. I want to ***keep far from a false matter***. I want to have a little distance from these conversations, because even though they seductive and engaging, they do not add much truth to my life

[Here I want to put an idea in all your minds, to look out for the Scholar-in-Residence who will be coming to CBI in the spring. We will be hosting Rabbi Amy Eilberg, who has written a very powerful book called From Enemy to Friend. She brings the considerable and sophisticated insights from our Jewish tradition to bear on this question of how to engage in heated and even partisan conversations with dignity and integrity].

In observing my internal conversations, the ones I have with myself I try to apply this standard as well: ***Keep far from a false matter. Mi'dvar sheker tirschak.*** I find it is sometimes easier to distance myself from falsehood, than it is to discern the truth. Often, for me, the whiff of untruth is the first step, the signal that tells me that there is something to investigate here.

In the Mussar tradition, we use the practice of a focus phrase to learn about ourselves. We keep this short phrase in our awareness, and use it to gain some insight when the attribute -the ***middah***, in this case truth--comes into play in our life.

When it comes to knowing the truth about ourselves, I want to share three focus phrases That have been helpful for me. The first is this one : **Keep far from a false matter: Midvar sheker tirschak**

Here is another one: Truth means: **“Not to say with the lips what the hearts cannot identify as true. “**

This is more properly a practice of observing my speech, of listening to the words I use to talk about things. To see if I am speaking things that I actually know, or things that I have just heard. To see if the words that I am using are precise or broad generalizations. To check whether I am taking shortcuts that lead to false impressions. Or even just to listen from the heart's perspective, and to experience the slight wince of untruth, of discomfort, when I hear my inner voice whisper: *Tom, you know better than that.*

There is a story about a well-known Mussar teacher who describes how one might gain this level of precision with himself . Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Auerbach was invited to give a lecture at a yeshiva in Jerusalem that was considering hiring him to be its leader. Not long after he had begun, he was interrupted with a question. After a few seconds of silence, Rabbi

Auerbach declared: “I am mistaken.” Then he then began a new topic, which was the focus of the rest of his lecture.

When he returned home, his wife asked how it had gone. “Not so well,” Reb Shlomo Zalman replied. “I had hardly begun when I admitted to a mistake. Actually, I had three different answers to offer. But I felt the **question was closer to the truth than any of my answers.**”
(From Alan Morinis, Everyday Holiness).

The question itself was closer to the truth than the three answers he could have offere .

PURIFY OUR HEARTS TO SERVE YOU IN TRUTH

For our inner life , there is another focus phrase which I find might be useful. It is actually a verse from the prayerbook:
Purify our hearts to serve you in truth: Taher Libenu l’ovdecha b’emet

In our struggle to understand our own thoughts and experiences we are at a disadvantage. We come up against some well-known problems. Like the self-defense or adaptive mechanisms of our own thinking, our mind’s natural blindnesses. These can be considered kinds of impurities. Substances that muck up the works, that impede clarity.

One is our tendency, as Rabbi Dan pointed out on Rosh Hashanah, to see ourselves as much more noble than we actually are, and to validate our own perceptions over those of others.

We come up against epistemological problems, problems of knowing, such as confirmation bias, where we tend to see or accept or value highly precisely that information that already conforms to what we believe. This works in the outside world, but also in our inner conversations.

One of the impurities of the heart, one of the reasons why it is so difficult to be honest with ourselves is because this honesty is or may be quite painful. I want to share a passage from the poet David Whyte, who has a small essay in his book Consolations about honesty. He writes:

Honesty is reached through the doorway of grief and loss.

The fear of loss, in one form or another, is the motivator behind all conscious and unconscious dishonesty. All of us are afraid of loss in all its forms, and therefore all of us are one short step away from dishonesty.

*The ability to speak the truth is as much the ability to describe what it is like to **stand in fear at this door** as it is to actually go through it and become that beautifully honest spiritual warrior we would like to become...*

Honesty is not the revealing of some foundational truth that gives us power, but rather [entering into] a state of vulnerability, where we acknowledge how powerless we feel, how little we actually know, and how afraid we are of not knowing.

Honesty is not found in revealing the truth, but in understanding how deeply afraid of it we are. This kind of honesty allows us to live without knowing: we do not know the full story, we do not know where we are in the story; we do not know who is at fault or who will carry the blame in the end.

I find these words helpful.

Honesty means loss. What might we lose? Our positive image of ourselves. Our sense of our own righteousness. Our confidence in what we have known. Our peace of mind. Our security in knowing where we stand. And not knowing what, if we follow our honest thoughts, we might have to give up.

I think this is true whether we are looking at the truths in our hearts, or whether we are reconsidering what we thought we knew, or believed, or wished were true, about country and our history. I often think that this, and not a lack of goodwill, is the biggest obstacle to the larger conversations we are trying to have about fixing problems of race and injustice in our country.

It is the fear of loss, the suspicion that if we do begin to change something will be lost, or we will lose something we have. It is a fear of the unknown and where it might lead that keeps us from full honesty

It is the same in our personal lives.

HOW TO USE THIS TIME

But there are times when despite our resistance, we do take upon ourselves the responsibility to give an accurate accounting, in a desire to come clean and move forward. I want to suggest that our tradition has given us a great gift in this practice we have of Yom Kippur. We can use these next 24 hours—where we have cleared our schedule, where we have made a commitment to be immersed in this spiritual space-- as a time to put some things out on the table. To allow some questions sit and hover. To allow some things to come to awareness, and to just sit with some of this discomfort. Without judging it.

To allow ourselves, in the words of David Whyte, *to stand in the doorway* but not to go through. We do not have to rush to conclusions. Rather it might be enough to just admit that we are in a place where these questions are starting to form and become visible. As the day grows on us and in us, as song and prayer and fasting soften us up, as we are strengthened by one another's presence, perhaps some things will begin to shift

I think we need to have confidence that just holding these questions and not running away from them might in itself be the beginning of a profound change .

SADNESS AND REGRET

There is always an undercurrent of sadness, and regret, that is just a part of Yom Kippur. When we start to look deeply at our place, at our life, we are filled with a kind of disquiet, a kind of sadness.

There is a sadness and regret when we realize how we have not lived up to our own standards, how we have fallen short in the past year or years. We get in touch with a kind of yearning for that purity in our hearts that comes into view alongside our prayers. And we also know, somehow, that this sadness can be the sign of the beginning of a new situation.

This is expressed most beautifully for me by the German writer Rilke, who writes, in his Letters to a Young Poet:

[I know] you have had many and great sadnesses. But please consider whether these sadnesses have not rather gone right through the center of yourself? Whether much in you has not altered, whether you have not somewhere, at some point of your being, undergone a change while you were sad? ...

If we could only see further than our knowledge reaches, perhaps we would endure our sadnesses with greater confidence than our joys. For they are the moments when something new has entered into us, something unknown; our feelings grow mute in shy perplexity, everything in us withdraws, a stillness comes, and the new, which no one knows, stands in the midst of it and is silent.

Almost all our sadnesses are moments of tension that we find paralyzing because everything familiar is for an instant taken away; because we stand in the middle of a transition where we cannot remain standing.

For this reason the sadness too passes: the new thing in us, the added thing, has entered into our heart, has gone into its inmost chamber, and is not even there any more, — is already in our blood.

And we do not learn what it was. We could easily be made to believe that nothing has happened, and yet we have changed, as a house changes into which a guest has entered. We cannot say who has come, perhaps we shall never know,

but many signs indicate that the future enters into us in this way

in order to transform itself in us long before it happens.

GOD LOVES THE BROKEN HEARTED

We sense that this sadness can eventually lead to joy, and to healing
We can allow ourselves to break our hearts a little, because we have confidence that we can also be healed. Our tradition tells us this in so many ways: Like Psalm 34:17-18, which declares

*The righteous call out, and the Lord heard
God delivers them from their troubles
The Lord is near to the broken-hearted,
God saves the crushed in spirit*

(Adonay karov l'nish'berey lev)

We can give ourselves over to this honesty and this sadness, because we have confidence that God loves the broken-hearted. There is even a Hebrew word, **husa** , which signifies this attitude of compassion on God's part for a flawed person, a flawed heart. We encounter this word in this line from selichot prayers :

(sing) Hanesham lach v'hguf poalach
Husa , husa al amalach

The soul is yours, and the body is your handiwork
Take pity on what you have made

Since God knows us, knows of what we are made, knows how hard it is to be human, God has a special compassion for our flaws and our brokenness **Husa** involves the absence of judgment. That's why we turn to God and ask for **husa** in our prayer. **Hus v'rachem aleinu.**

And even if some of us are not so certain about God or God's attitudes, we can still develop this attitude of **husa**, of compassionate looking at ourselves. It can help us to distinguish between the judging voice --the one that says: "You're no good" and "you're hopeless"-- and the loving one. In the words of Naomi Levy:

***Husa** doesn't mean blindness or denial. It means: with kinder eyes we give ourselves permission to look at ourselves without cringing and without hate, so that we can actually see what's there, what needs fixing.
So we can face what we resist.*

The soul's voice says: I not only need to take stock of my failings , I need to take stock of my strengths. I need to know what I've been blessed with so I can understand what I have to work with.

**Keep far from a false matter
Do not say with the lips what the heart cannot confirm as true
Purify our hearts to serve you in truth**

My these guide you in your searching
Tonight, tomorrow, and in the days to come.

