

**“May The Eye of God Be Upon Us”  
Day Two Rosh Hashanah 2016  
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“Integrity is doing the right thing, even when no one is watching.”

C.S. Lewis

Once upon a time there was a rabbi who really liked to play golf. One year, on Yom Kippur, he woke up early. He realized that he desperately needed to get in a game of golf before services.

And so, as the sun was just rising, he stole off to the golf course.

The angels in heaven, who were watching all of this, were terribly upset. They came before God and said, “God! You must stop this! This is a disgrace! It’s the holiest day of the year, and the rabbi is playing a game of golf!? You must do something! Perhaps you could bring on a thunderstorm and ruin his game!”

“Relax,” God said. “I’ll take care of it.”

The angels watched as the rabbi teed up. The sun was just rising. It was a beautiful day. Not a cloud in the sky. When was God going to act? What was God going to do?

The rabbi stepped up to the tee and swung his club and hit the ball solidly. It rose higher and higher and higher. It was a long drive and the ball landed and bounced its way over to the green, where it continued to roll, in a gentle curve, right into the cup. A hole in one!

The angels were crestfallen. How could God have failed to act? How could God let the rabbi get away with this?

“Why, O Lord? Why?” they cried out.

“Relax,” said God. “Just think:” he continued, “Who is he going to tell?”



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This is a very old joke. It was old when I was a child. But I like it because it raises an important question:

**How do we behave when we think that no one is watching? Do we behave the way we know we should?**

Here is a *true* golf story that addresses the same question.

**Shane Lowrey** is a world-class golfer. A few months ago, he was playing in the US Open tournament in Oakmont, Pennsylvania, when something very odd happened. His ball moved. Yes, he had stood right in front of the ball to hit it; he had, as they say in golf, “addressed the ball,” when all of a sudden, by itself, the ball moved.

Now, when the ball moves like that, even without being touched, that adds one stroke to your score. Even those of us who don’t know anything about golf know that strokes are bad. The more strokes, the lower your score. The less likely you are to win.

Shane Lowrey did something that was automatic to him, though it might not have been to everyone: He called a penalty on himself. That is, based on his observation of what occurred, he added a stroke to his score.

Now, let me emphasize: *no one else other than Shane Lowrey saw that ball move. If he hadn’t said anything, no one would have known.* (See: <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/19/sports/golf/us-open-leader-shane-lowry-one-extra-stroke.html? r=1> .)

Why did he do it?

When Shane Lowrey was asked that question, his answer was quite simple. He said, “I had to penalize myself.”

What he was saying is that there’s a **moral foundation** to the game of golf that demands that kind of integrity. It’s kind of like that refrain in the Geico commercial: “It’s what you do.” (See: <https://www.geico.com/more/geico-community/commercials/its-what-you-do/> .) In the game of golf, Shane

Lowrey was suggesting, “it’s what you do.” It was inconceivable to him not to do what he did.

Now, of course, not everyone behaves this way. Some people do cheat in golf. There’s a great story about cheating in golf in *Goldfinger*, the James Bond novel by Ian Fleming. Even while professing to follow the rules, Goldfinger improves his lie, tries to distract his opponents and in other ways violates the rules of golf. For Goldfinger, calling a penalty on yourself is NOT what you do.

Think about it: How *fortunate* Shane Lowrey is! To know the right thing to do, and then to behave the right way—without hemming and hawing, without internal doubt. Doing the right thing—even to his own disadvantage—without being forced into it, when he could easily *not* have done it. Not looking for a loophole, not wondering whether, “Gee, if the ball moves in the forest and no one else sees it, has it really moved?”

By the way, that doesn’t mean that what he did was easy for him. Shane Lowrey admitted that he was very frustrated when this happened. But to him one thing was and is clear: when you play golf, ***you play by the rules.***

And life, in this respect at least, is like golf.

Our key rule should be that, in the words of the Talmud, our insides should match our outsides. We should act and speak with integrity. We should do what is right even if we are the only ones who would know the difference.

And yet, we humans, to quote Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, have an extraordinary capacity for self-justification and rationalization. After doing the wrong thing, we may be more likely to convince ourselves that it really isn’t that bad than to correct ourselves—especially if we have to pay a price for doing so. According to Professor Michael Cunningham, a psychologist at the University of Louisville, we evaluate other people based on their *behavior*; we evaluate ourselves based upon our *intentions*.”

We cut corners. We make excuses. We don’t act entirely morally.

So what Shane Lowrey did is quite impressive. Why didn’t *he* succumb to rationalization?

The reason is that he had internalized moral principles. They had become a part of who he is.

In the Jewish tradition, we have a way of talking about this, that is familiar to anyone who's ever been to a High Holiday service. It goes back to a statement by Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi, Rabbi Judah the Patriarch, in Pirkei Avot: "Ponder this and you won't fall into the hands of sin: Keep in mind that above you is **an all-seeing eye** and a listening ear; and be aware that all your deeds are being recorded in a book."

The idea is that someone—namely, God—is always looking. Even when no *human being* is looking at us, our deeds are always being observed and recorded. In other words, we're under surveillance. Divine surveillance. As we recite, again and again on Yom Kippur, referring to God: "*Atah yodea razei olam...*"—"You know every secret since the world began, and what is hidden deep inside every living thing." And that awareness inspires us to behave properly.

Ours is not the only culture to develop the metaphor.

A few years ago, I was looking for a gift at one of my favorite pottery shops in the world: Jerusalem Pottery, owned by the Karakashian Brothers on the Via Dolorosa, in the Old City of Jerusalem. There were two tiles that stood out to me. Both had a beautiful depiction of an eye on them, surrounded by text in Armenian characters. The eyes on the two tiles looked similar but, looking closely, I noticed that, even though I couldn't make out what they said, the Armenian texts on the two tiles looked different. So I asked the salesman what the texts said.

The first one, he said, was, "The Jealous Eye Never Sleeps."

"I see," I said. "And what about the second one?"

The second one, he said, was, "May the Eye of God Be Upon Us."



“OK,” I said to him. “I think I’ll take the second one.”

As he was wrapping it up, I was wondering to myself: “Who in the world is going to buy the one that says, “The jealous eye never sleeps?” Who do you buy *that* for?”

Now, I know that to some of us, this image, this metaphor of the eye of God, just doesn’t work. It seems silly. But we may want to reconsider that.

This idea, the idea of the “eye of God,” is a classical way of thinking about what we would today call our conscience. (The Hebrew word for conscience, *matzpun*, which refers to one’s internal moral compass, is a relatively modern one: you don’t find it in the Bible or the Talmud.)

Our ancestors had a notion of an *external* eye that saw everything we did. Over time, we developed an equally metaphorical notion of an *internal* conscience, a superego, a part of our psychological make-up that puts moral restraints on our behavior.

And that’s fine, but there is evidence that the traditional metaphor is effective. It’s clear that people behave better when they think they are being watched. It’s even more striking than that: people behave better even when there is only a picture of someone watching them in the room—even *when they know that it’s only a picture*. Researchers found that if you put up posters with human eyes on them in a college cafeteria, people are much more

likely to dispose of the trash on their trays. Apparently, we have built into our neural architecture something called “gaze detection” that is not subject to our control. It’s part of our very primitive brain. When we sense that we are being watched, that triggers a tendency to behave properly.

Maybe we should all get one of those Armenian pottery tiles!

After all, we don’t always do the right thing. Consider the following scenarios:

1. You’re running late for a meeting. Do you say that a prior meeting or phone call went longer than you expected—when really you were just checking Facebook?
2. When you shop at a supermarket where they don’t take your groceries to your car, do you return your grocery cart like you’re supposed to, or just leave it and hope that it doesn’t roll into the side of someone’s car?
3. When you’re shopping and looking through a rack of clothes, if something falls off a hanger, do you pick it up, or pretend it didn’t happen, or say, “That’s someone else’s job”?

(Adapted from, “Are You Accountable, Even When No One’s Looking? By Colette Carlson)

I think we know that those are the kinds of scenarios in which we’d behave differently if we thought we were being watched.

Here’s another one:

I have a friend who was depositing a check into his account at an ATM machine. He was in a bit of a rush because he had a haircut appointment in three minutes. He put the check into the machine, and it came back with a request that he confirm that the check’s amount was **\$857,492.73**. That actually wasn’t the correct amount of the check. It was off by **about \$850,000**. The ATM asked him to press a button to either process the deposit or to edit the amount.

What do you do in a situation like this? Is it a case of “Bank error in your favor; collect \$850,000?” Or is it much simpler than that?

All sorts of questions flashed into my friend’s mind: How long would it take for the bank to discover its error? What could I do with \$850,000? What excuse could I give if I accepted the deposit? And: Will I make it to my haircut on time?

As in golf, there are exceptional people who behave properly, even when no one is looking, even when no one—no human, at least—could possibly see them.

There was a Talmudic sage named Rav Safra who once had a jewel for sale. One day, he was reciting the Shema. Now, Jewish law is very clear: when one is reciting the Shema, one must not interrupt it. While he was reciting the Shema, someone came up to him and offered him a sum of money for it. Rav Safra was silent, and turned away. The person understood his actions to indicate that his offer was too low, that Rav Safra wasn't willing to sell the jewel to him for the price he had offered. So he increased his offer. Some say he doubled it. When Rav Safra finally finished saying the Shema, he turned to the person and said: I will sell you the jewel; but I'll only take what you had first offered me, for that is what it's worth and that is the price that I had already decided to sell it to you for.

Now, there is no rule that says that you have to sell an object, particularly a jewel, at a particular price. What would have been so bad about Rav Safra accepting the larger amount of money that the buyer was willing to pay? After all, *the man was willing to pay it!* It would have been *legal* for him to accept the larger sum. No question about that.

But something *would* have been lost: namely, Rav Safra's sense of integrity. He had decided that he was willing to accept the original amount of money. He didn't want, even inadvertently, to take advantage of the buyer's misunderstanding. And if he had accepted more money, he would have been exploiting his own piety to deceive another human being, which made it even more questionable.

Just think: no one would have known about this had Rav Safra not spoken up! He could have received that higher price and his reputation would have remained intact. But if he had done that, he would have been ignoring the eye of God.

As we say—or as the siddur instructs us to say—every morning: “A human being should always be in awe of God in private as well as in public.” That Rav Safra was. He knew he was visible to the eye of God.

Now, in the story, Rav Safra doesn't explain his actions. The impression you get from this and other stories about Rav Safra is that he did the right thing because it was the right thing to do. Period. "If you're Rav Safra, it's what you do."

By the way, my friend standing in front of the ATM machine pushed "edit the amount," entered the correct amount of his check, and managed to make it to his haircut on time. Let's face it: pushing that button instead of going ahead with the transaction—"it's what you do."

If we find it difficult to relate to that expression, "the eye of God," let's not think of that scary "jealous eye;" instead, let's think of the inner eye within each of us—that eye that we call our conscience. As the Torah says, "*lo bashamayim hi,*"—our moral standards aren't in the heavens. They're potentially within each and every one of us.

Life gives us the opportunity to make choices each and every day. Shane Lowrey made a choice, and as disappointing as it might have been to face the consequences, he doesn't regret what he did. What choices will we make in the days ahead?

May this be a year in which, in the words of that wonderful Armenian tile, "the eye of God will be upon [each and every one of] us," guiding us, and protecting us.

Shanah Tovah!