

Three Jewish Values We Need Today

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Whereas the president of the United States gets to give an annual “State of the Union” address; the Pope speaks to the world in his annual Christmas and Easter homilies, and world leaders have the rostrum of the United Nations to speak about their perspective on world matters, rabbis have the High Holidays as a time when spiritual leaders in synagogues across the country have the opportunity to address our people, the state of the Jewish condition, our souls, our nation and the world. It seems that with each passing year it has become even more important than the previous one to search our almost 4,000 year old tradition to find relevant wisdom and insights that can help make sense of our world and to apply its teachings to our times and to our lives.

One of the difficulties in diagnosing our current state of affairs is that people hold such conflicting notions and express so many contradictory incompatible ideas. A story is told by Isaac Bashevis Singer about a man who visited the Jewish community in Vilna. He came back and told his friend, “The Jews of Vilna are remarkable. You won’t believe what I encountered there. I saw a Jew who studied Talmud all day long. I saw a Jew who was trying to figure out how to make a quick fortune. I saw a Jew raising the red flag calling for a communist revolution. I saw a Jew running after women. I saw a Jew who does not touch women. And the amazing thing is – it was all the same person!”

I couldn’t help but notice at the time of the passing of Senator John McCain the overwhelming outpouring of calls from all quarters for more bi-partisanship. I think it reflects a longing and desire for what appears to be absent today -- greater tolerance and cooperation in our civil discourse. Yet at the same time that calls for moderation in the public arena were so prominent, as in our story, some of the very same people urging greater cooperation with the other side expressed criticism of their fellow Democrats for working with Republicans, and of their fellow Republicans for being willing to cooperate with Democrats.

We can’t have it both ways – politicians who are less contentious and who we encourage to work with the opposition, while demanding that they be confrontational and not yield or compromise. It is easy to point out hypocrisy in others, but the problem is not just our leaders. It is us.

Are we sincere when we say we want more civility, especially with those with whom we disagree? While everyone always agrees with the need for greater harmony, the truth is few really mean it, and even

fewer actually practice it. In truth, we usually do not have friends or tolerance for those with whom we disagree. On college campuses advocates of free speech oppose efforts to silence proponents of their position while often working to shut down those they oppose.

I read that a recent poll said that 50% of Republicans do not want their child to marry a Democrat, and nearly a third of Democrats feel the same way about Republicans.

Yes, the problem is us.

With that in mind, I want to speak to you tonight about three important Hebrew terms and values that I think can help us get out of the morass we are in. Each one, like most all other Hebrew words has a three letter root.

I start with a battered, beleaguered term, *emet*, truth, which the Talmud says is one of the pillars upon which the world stands.

Our rabbis observed that the Hebrew word for truth, *emet* consists of the first, middle and last letters of the alphabet, making it the equivalent of saying in English A – Z and signifying that truth demands accuracy from beginning to end. Additionally they note that it is no coincidence that all three of the letters stand firmly and fully on a line because truth is unshakeable.

This contrasts with the word for lie, *sheker*, which consists of the last letters of the alphabet, but out of order. Furthermore, two of the three letters only touch a line with one point, showing how unstable it is.

Included in the Ten Commandments is the prohibition against telling an untruth in a court of law because where there is truth, there is trust, *emunah*, faith and belief in others. Truth and trust, civility and respect, are virtues all too lacking these days, but which the Torah identified as the foundation and the essential qualities upon which a just and fair society is built. This is why the assault on the very concept of truth should be of concern to all – regardless of your political views.

Whether you agree with President Trump that the news media distorts truth and misreports, or whether you are appalled by the exaggerations, lies, mistruths, distortions and assaults on the media uttered by the President, or if you think there is some truth in both, or if you think both are mistaken, I would hope we can all agree that truth is of paramount importance, and demand it of all and hold all accountable.

I came across a story about a guy who wanted to sell his car to a dealer, but had a minor problem – it had

over 250,000 miles on it. The dealer told him there is no way he can sell a car with so many miles, but he quietly took him aside and told him he knew someone who could help by adjusting the odometer. A couple weeks later the dealer inquired what happened and why the guy hadn't come back to sell his car. The man said, "Are you kidding? Why should I sell my car now? It only has 60,000 miles on it."

Truth and honesty must begin with us.

When I first came across the joke I just told an alternate ending occurred to me -- The guy could have told the dealer he wasn't going to buy or sell from him, because now he knew that since he was not truthful, he was not someone he could trust and therefore would not do business with him.

Truth demands that we be honest with ourselves, which requires us to confront our own faults, foibles and shortcomings.

I was extremely uncomfortable when Larry David hosted Saturday Night Live last year and had a monologue that bordered on being anti-semitic. As allegations were just starting to come out and beginning to mount about powerful individuals taking advantage of their positions of power to perform nonconsensual acts and to sexually harass and abuse women, giving birth to the MeToo movement, he said, kind of as an aside to the audience, "Have you noticed that most of the people accused of doing these things are Jews?"

Knowing that the audience he was speaking to was a national audience and not just to Jews, I cringed when I heard him say that. But between you and me, since we are among family here tonight, I feel I can say this -- unfortunately there is truth in what he said. While abuse can be found in many quarters, (including the Church itself), we should be embarrassed and ashamed of how all too many prominent Jewish men have treated women. Somehow they did not get the message that Judaism teaches that everyone is created *b'tzelem Elohim*, in the image of God. The notion that every person should be treated with *kavod*: respect and dignity did not get transmitted, or if it was, it did not penetrate their consciousness.

Those who feel exasperated by the current state of affairs should remember -- If we want our leaders to act decently, then we must not just demand and expect it of them, we also must act that way, and demand it of ourselves, as well.

This brings me to the second of the three terms I mention tonight -- *derech eretz*, which means acting towards others courteously and treating them with a sense of decency and respect. It means being

considerate and sensitive to the impact our words and actions have on another person's feelings.

The 19th century founder of the Musar movement, Rabbi Israel Salanter taught that if each of us would act kindly towards others, we could change the world. He once wrote, "When I was a young man, I wanted to change the world . . . Now, as an old man, I realize the only thing I can change is myself . . . But I've come to recognize that if long ago I had started with myself, then I could have made an impact on my family. And, my family and I could have made an impact on our town. And that, in turn, could have changed the country, and we could all indeed have changed the world."

Put another way, a verse in Pirkei Avot teaches, "*Mitzvah goreret mitzvah*: One mitzvah leads to another." And it continues, "*Averah goreret averah*: one sin leads to another." It is telling us that we, by our actions and the choices we make, have the power to create the kind of society and world we wish to inhabit.

The symbol of the month of Tishrei is a scale, because our deeds are weighed and placed on a scale at this time of year. The midrash says that when we are judged we are at total equilibrium – the number of good deeds and sins we have committed in the previous year is balanced and equal. This is meant to motivate us to ensure that the next act we perform will tilt the balance in our favor. And for extra emphasis, the midrash goes on to say that the entire world is at perfect equilibrium, meaning that the very next act we perform could not only have a positive impact on our own lives, but could potentially bring the Messiah, and thereby lead to the redemption of the entire world.

A headline of a recent article in the New York Times Sunday Review section asked, "What kind of planet do we wish to have?" Although the article discusses the environment, I immediately thought the headline writer must be Jewish, or must at least be familiar with our High Holiday liturgy, for that is what these Aseret Y'mei Teshuvah are all about: What kind of planet do we wish to have? On Yom Kippur we are called upon to reflect upon the kind of people we should seek to be, and in so doing, we acknowledge that it can have an impact on the kind of world we will have.

And although the article was about the environment and not Yom Kippur, it said, "every human action or nonaction generates a labyrinth of consequences..." and concludes, "The planet we make will reflect the people we are", all of which is true. I would only add -- the choices we make reflect the people we are and that will determine the planet we will have.

Going back to the Larry David routine -- 10 years ago our country experienced a financial melt-down in which there, too, Jews played a role. Motivated by excessive profit and pursuit of material gain, once

again, I attribute part of the problem to drifting away from traditional Jewish values. We can spend our lives trying to accumulate material goods and comfort, or we can understand that joy comes from honesty and hard work – and from sharing and giving.

As Erich Fromm wrote in the *Art of Loving*, “Not one who has much is rich, but one who gives much. The hoarder who is anxiously worried about losing something is psychologically speaking the one who is poor and impoverished, regardless of how much he has.”

Not what we have, but what we give away is the true measure of a person. When the British Jewish philanthropist Moses Montefiore was asked his net worth, he would say, “Whatever I gave to charity is my true worth.” Similarly, Nathan Strauss said that the only way to measure his wealth was to look at his checkbook and see how much he had given away to know how rich he was.

On Yom Kippur when we think about our shortcomings and the values we should embrace, let us also reflect on the final term I want you to consider this evening, “tzedekah,” whose three letter root is Tzedek.

One of the central prayers of the season, the Unetaneh Tokef prayer speaks about the role of three pillars at this time of year – teshuva, tefillah and tzedekah. We are told that the three are so crucial they have the power to avert the harshness of the decree. Teshuva entails the important work of repentance, and relates to the difficult work of looking within to heal our relationships and seek forgiveness. (More about that tomorrow.) Tefillah is prayer, which is intended to help us focus on the themes of the season and to lead us to evaluate where we fall short and find the motivation to do teshuva.

But what is tzedekah doing in this list?

Performing acts to bring about a more just world shows that the words we utter and the prayers we recite are not meaningless platitudes, but are transformed and translated into action. Unlike teshuva and tefillah, tzedekah requires action predicated upon a willingness to give of oneself on behalf of others. But like the other two, it requires sincerity and humility, all relevant qualities when God is determining our fate at this time of year.

Tzedekah is often translated as charity. But as you may know, there really is no word in Hebrew that corresponds to the English term “charity.” That’s because the English word charity is something one chooses to do. Believe it or not, and as unpopular and uncomfortable as it may make you, when it comes to tzedekah, we Jews do not have a choice. Doing what is right and just is an inescapable obligation

incumbent upon all of us. The Hebrew word tzedekah reflects a recognition that we are part of a community and are all connected. Acts of tzedekah are an acknowledgement that each and every one of us has a responsibility to care for each other and to maintain and upkeep the institutions that serve our community. This is why the Talmud stipulates that even the poor who receive assistance and who are supported by the community are required to give tzedekah.

Giving of one's resources is a selfless act of sacrifice on behalf of the greater good that is inherently, and instinctively ingrained in us Jews, as demonstrated by the story of the first grade teacher who is teaching students to develop confidence in front of others by having children stand up and say something to the class. The first child, Joey McQuire comes to the front of the class, and says, "I like to go fishing at the lake with my dad." Very good, the teacher says. Next, Susie Rodriguez says, "I like to go to the movies with my family." When the teacher called on Joey Shapiro to say something to the class, he stands up and says, "I pledge \$5."

I will never forget my very first High Holiday experience as an ordained rabbi. The synagogue of 1,700 members in Miami was seeking to raise funds for a building campaign. The senior rabbi announced that he would be in his office after the service, waiting for anyone who wanted to see him to let him know that they were willing to step up and become "Guardians", major contributors to the campaign.

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. But what was even more incredulous was when I went back to my office after services, which was next to the senior rabbi's, and saw there actually were people lined up and waiting to see him to let him know they would contribute to the campaign. It was almost as if they were hoping he would say yes and allow them to contribute. For the record, in case you are wondering, no one was turned away.

There are all kinds of ways to raise funds, but I had never seen or heard of this method.

Regardless of how synagogues, the Federation and other worthy Jewish organizations raise funds, it is always a challenge. Although I doubt most of us have experienced the selling of aliyot, and bristle at the thought of doing so, there was a time when this, as well as "calling names" or "cards" was the preferred means synagogues used to raise funds. Some people get uncomfortable even just talking about the subject of donating and mistakenly think it should not be mentioned on the holidays.

But those who came before us never shied away from educating people about the need to support our communal institutions, for they recognized this as an opportunity to speak about the needs of the community. When we engage in tzedekah and give of ourselves and our resources, whether to

Federation or a synagogue, we become partners in a larger collective. It shows that we think not only of ourselves, but are willing to take responsibility for our community and to do what it takes to perpetuate the values precious to us, and those who preceded us.

As you heard on Rosh Hashana we are currently engaged in a campaign to raise funds for our future and to allow us to do the kinds of programs and have the staff that have become our hallmark, and which you, our members appropriately demand and expect.

Unlike the rabbi in my first synagogue, and even perhaps unlike Diane and Jay who are leading our campaign, I do not think that everyone should donate to the campaign. I have prepared a list for easy reference, so you can see if any applies to you -- Only the following people should contribute to our Hineni Campaign:

Anyone who has ever celebrated a life cycle event at B'nai Tzedek

If you have learned something about Judaism, or expanded your observance as a result of being a member here.

If you enjoy the cantor's beautiful voice and the way he leads our davening.

If you have ever been moved, inspired or touched by one of my sermons,

If you have a child who has learned or made friends at B'nai Tzedek

If you have made a friend or formed relationships at B'nai Tzedek

If you have made a business connection, picked up a client, contact, patient or made a business deal as a result of your connection to B'nai Tzedek

If you have ever been comforted during a time of loss by our staff, clergy or fellow congregants.

If I have ever helped you get through a difficult time in your life, or if you appreciate the work I do as your rabbi on your behalf in the larger community,

If you have never made a donation before to a Jewish cause.

And the final two categories of people who should contribute:

If you did not contribute to the first campaign to build our building

If you did contribute to the first campaign to build our building

In other words, like I said, the campaign is not for everyone, just the people included in the list above. Only those who care about the survival of the Jewish community, who wish to see the unique brand that is B'nai Tzedek be able to continue to serve our members, should contribute to this campaign.

While I won't be waiting in my office after services for you to let me know you will be a part of our campaign, I hope you will respond generously, in the spirit of tzedekah called for at this time of year. As one member told me, although I do not come often to the synagogue, I am amazed when I see all the shul does for so many, and by contributing, I am able to support it. Another said, I think of it as my insurance policy, and am glad to know the synagogue is here for me, my family and others.

So today when we ask what kind of planet do we want to have we need to consider what we need to

change and improve in our personal lives, which means evaluating our priorities, and what is important to us, and that includes being more generous and supportive of our synagogue and worthy causes.

I want to conclude with a story about actor Jon Voight, who is Catholic, the father of Angelina Jolie. He is an outspoken defender of Israel and the Jewish people. In a recent interview he explained that his affinity for Jewish culture and connection to the Jewish people had its origins in his childhood. As a young child the image of the Holocaust made an indelible impression upon him. He felt he had a responsibility to stand up and fight anti-semitism.

Equally important, he explained, was what happened when his father was a child. His father came from a very poor family and started caddying at a Jewish country club in Scarsdale, New York when he was eight years old. The club was started by Jews who wanted to play golf, but weren't allowed to join the clubs in the area. As the actor explains, "They didn't complain. They went around raising the money to buy land and then built the club, and because of their ingenuity and because of their flexibility and vision, my dad had this job. So I knew at a very early age the insanity of antisemitism."

His father would tell the golfers at the club that it was his birthday, even when it wasn't, so they would give him "a little extra money" as a gift at the end of the day. Even after he was caught in his lie by a club member, he was never booted from the country club.

Voight said the Jewish members at the club, "understood what he was doing, and they even admired his chutzpah. They kind of embraced this young man and taught him many things... When I was 14, I compared him to his siblings —they were nothing like him. He was so superior in every way, not to demean them. They were very nice people, but they just didn't have the same qualities he had and the grace that he had. And I said to myself, you know something? (It's because) my dad was raised in the Jewish culture. That's who he is."

It just shows that you never know the good that can come from small acts of kindness, of generosity, of treating someone decently and with respect. Rather than bemoan the current state of affairs, let us resolve to adhere to the middot, the virtues Judaism calls upon us to live by: truth, decency and generosity. Just imagine the good we can do and the impact we can have on our community and world.

Rather than have comedians make us squirm when talking about unattractive things Jews do, let us strive to see to it that these are the kinds of stories and qualities – kindness and helping others – that we will be associated with in the coming year, and for which we should be known and to determine the kind of planet and synagogue we will have.

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