

## Fiddling with Fidelity and Faith

*Rabbi Stuart Weinblatt*

*Yom Kippur*

*October 8, 2011*

This past year will be remembered for many things. Among the more memorable aspects would have to be the antics of some very prominent figures, and how often the same storyline seemed to repeat itself. Even though by now we should be immune and used to great men acting foolishly we never cease to be amazed by the fall from grace of the powerful. We are still shocked as if it is a novelty we are hearing for the first time when men who seem to have it all, whose political careers are on a trajectory towards true greatness so wantonly risk everything they have worked their whole life to achieve and who throw it all away.

In case you are not sure what I am referring to, I am confident that all I have to do is mention the name, and it is not even necessary for me to elaborate on what the scandal was. You will be able to fill in the indiscretion on your own. Arnold Schwarzenegger, Dominique Strauss-Kahn, Anthony Weiner, Tiger Woods. With so many recent high profile incidents you might have forgotten Christopher Lee, the congressman whose shirtless photos showing off his physique on Craigslist a few months earlier landed him in hot water. The year before, there was client number 9, now CNN commentator and news analyst, former New York Governor Eliot Spitzer. Lest you forget, there was also Senator Larry Craig, of the wide stance; Louisiana Senator David Vitter whose phone number was found in the records of a Washington madam; and the man who would've been and perhaps could've been President, John Edwards, to name a few. You get the picture, and I mention it today because it helps to explain the meaning of this afternoon's Torah reading --- but more about that later.

How can we understand these shenanigans? Are we living in an era when these kinds of things are happening more often, or is it that we just hear more about it nowadays and are more aware of what is going on? To what do we attribute the hubris, the foolishness, the willingness to cast caution to the wind, and one's career along with it? How do these otherwise intelligent individuals not think of the hurt and pain they cause their family by their reckless behavior? It is as if they are out of control, and there may be something to that.

Research suggests that with power comes the temptation to stray, as well as the tendency for those in positions of power to assume they can get away with doing things they should know are immoral and unacceptable. Some believe that the powerful may have a false sense of invincibility.

Frank Farley, a psychologist at Temple University and former president of the American Psychological Association, said that rather than the position increasing the likelihood of affairs, it's actually the other way around — a job in politics might tend to attract a type of person who loves to take risks and who seeks out such thrills. After all, he says, politicians and celebrities have ample egos which need to be appeased and are accompanied by ample opportunities to cheat. Students of human behavior also link ambition and the pursuit of positions of power with the tendency to seek instant gratification. Consequently the same drive that propels some to aspire to prominence may lead these same people to ignore the long term consequences of their actions.

One would think that in this day and age of the internet and ubiquitous cell phone cameras prominent people would be more discreet. Tweeting messages instantly circulated around the globe should give pause so that these very public people would worry about the consequences and embarrassment caused by widespread exposure of private affairs. Despite the high risk and potential for downfall,

people who have attained wealth, power and fame and who seem to have it all still often tempt fate and engage in dangerous acts of deception. Thomas Mann with the Brookings Institute said, "It's fascinating the extent to which the warnings about the high risk of exposure and severe political damage have not dissuaded some people" from acting irresponsibly.

In defense of Tiger Woods' liaisons, late night comedian Steven Colbert showed a picture of Tiger's wife, strikingly beautiful blond Swedish model, Elin Nordegren, and asked, "Can you really blame a guy who has to come home to a woman who looks like this for cheating on her?" In his own inimitable way Colbert's joke points out that much more is involved here than satisfying sexual desire.

The rabbis' observations about human behavior recorded in the Talmud are very insightful. One verse says, "*Ein adam choteh ellah im kein nichnas bo ruach shtut* – anytime a person sins it is because there entered into him a spirit of insanity." From the perspective of Jewish tradition criminal or sinful acts occur because a person momentarily is unable to distinguish between right and wrong. Unable to consider the consequences of his behavior, the individual is rendered incapable of making moral distinctions. Loss of one's moral compass leads one to act in an insane or stupid manner.

While not a valid excuse, and not very comforting or reassuring to his wife, there may actually be scientific validity when Anthony Weiner, told the press, "I don't know what I was thinking." In an article in *The New York Times*, on the Anthony Weiner scandal Dr. Helen Fisher, biological anthropologist at Rutgers University was quoted as saying that when Anthony Weiner said, "I don't know what I was thinking", he probably literally was not seeing or evaluating or weighing properly all of the outcomes (of his actions)." It was as if he was blind to the long term implications of what he was doing, which could be the origin or true meaning of the term "blind ambition." Perhaps this is one reason why our confessions on Yom Kippur include sins we commit knowingly and unknowingly, willingly and unwillingly. As Dr. Bianca Acevedo of the department of psychological and brain sciences at the University of California put it, "Individuals (in positions of power)... may have less cognitive resources to regulate their behavior in other domains."

President Clinton explained in his autobiography that the reason he had an affair with Monica Lewinsky was quite simply because he could. In other words, he failed to exercise any filter or self restraint.

The Talmud may have intuited what 21<sup>st</sup> century psychological studies reveal. 2,000 years ago our sages put it this way, "the greater the man, the greater the *yetzer hara*, one's evil inclination." Not meant to be a rationalization or justification, it is more of a cautionary note to alert overachievers of the need to be careful and vigilant so they will know they need to work that much harder to control their instincts. It is indeed interesting to see how this ancient observation parallels recent events and current scientific thinking on the subject.

Judaism teaches us that an essential element of life is learning how to exert self control, a fundamental aspect of this day. On Yom Kippur we are commanded to deprive ourselves of food and drink, as well as to refrain from conjugal relations, all of which relate to this theme of being able to repress our urges. We sometimes confuse desire with need. According to Maimonides the mitzvot were given to us to introduce discipline in our lives. By keeping kosher for example, and knowing that certain foods are off limits, he and other commentators say we internalize the message that not all is permitted.

All of which may help explain the unusual choice of the Torah portion for Yom Kippur afternoon.

While most Jews know that the haftarah for Yom Kippur afternoon is the book of Jonah, I would venture to guess that most could not cite what the Torah reading is. At first glance the traditional Torah reading

Leviticus 18, which precedes the Book of Jonah is a rather unusual selection, and I have often wondered why it was chosen for Yom Kippur. It is all about permitted and prohibited sexual unions, and what is deemed promiscuous behavior. It seems so obscure and detached from the meaning of the day that liberal Jews replace it altogether and the Conservative mahzor offers an alternative option. The far more uplifting and stirring reading, from the chapter that follows, Parashat Kedoshim, the Holiness Code, Leviticus 19 speaks of the covenantal relationship binding Jews to God and of the ethical demands placed upon us defines how to live a life of holiness is often read instead. Although the reading is on the busiest day of the year, it is in the afternoon, and I bet not too many sermons have been given about it. I know that I have never read one, nor have I ever given a High Holiday sermon about it, until today.

Tosafot explains the traditional selection as a warning against frivolity. This was especially important because at one time, believe it or not, on Yom Kippur, when the Temple stood, young men and women would go out in the afternoon to the fields, where marriage proposals were offered. Rabbi Elliot Dorff amplifies this and says it is placed here so that we would be reminded that our sexual activities should reflect the values and character of Judaism. Rashi, based on *Masechet Megillah* (31a) of the Talmud says that since all people are subject to strong passions from time to time, they should hear this reading and repent in case they have sinned in this manner. When we think of the chapter in those terms, it is not so perplexing that a reading about controlling our passions and instincts would be chosen for this holy day when we deny ourselves food and other earthly pleasures.

Recognizing how hard it is to do overcome the pulls on us is why we call those who are able to do so heroes. Ben Zoma is quoted in *Pirke Avot*, *Sayings of the Sages*, as saying that a true hero, someone who exhibits true strength is one who is able to overcome his inclination, his *yetzer hara*. The message of the Talmud is that we all have temptations and may find ourselves in potentially compromising situations. When you master your passions and tame the forces pulling on you, you enhance your humanity and decency.

Judith Plaskow, writing in the commentary on the new Mahzor Lev Shalem says Leviticus 18 reminds us that we need boundaries in our relationships, for even private matters have broader social consequences. She explains that we Jews honor the image of God by honoring the body when we dress modestly and not in a revealing manner. We read this passage to affirm that all sexual unions should be consensual and not used to abuse, exploit, control or humiliate another human being. I cannot read this and not think, for example of the sin of domestic violence or spousal abuse, as an affront to God that should be treated as such.

In this context we see that the Torah reading, as well as parts of the vidui, the confession of our sins which also includes these acts compel us to think on Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the year about how we relate to and treat one another, even in the most intimate private matters. These are also of concern to God. On this day we should remember to exemplify the Jewish teaching every day and in every way that all human beings are created *betzelem Elohim*, in the image of God.

Some may get the wrong impression about our religion. Judaism is not at all prudish or advocating celibacy. I am reminded of the story of the priest who was poring over documents in the archives of the Vatican when suddenly he came across an ancient text that caused him to stop what he was doing and summon his fellow priests to hear what he had discovered. Barely able to contain his excitement, he tells them, "You won't believe the good news. Guess what I just found -- it says here, in this sacred manuscript, 'celebrate.' Not celibate, celebrate!"

Again, citing the Talmud, in a tremendously liberating verse, celebrating the beauty of life, we are told that when we face our Maker, one of the questions we will be asked is, "Did you take advantage of and

enjoy all of life's permitted pleasures?" What a profound teaching. We are not supposed to not enjoy life. It is a sin if we do not. The point is to enjoy life in a way which does not hurt others, in a way which does not violate the integrity of others, in a way which reflects the Divine by being respectful of our relationships with the ones we love and care about.

While working on this sermon I thought about the sacred vow expressed between a bride and groom conveyed in the words recited by a *hatan*, a groom at a Jewish wedding ceremony. I believe it can be instructive for it states the ideal set forth by our tradition as to how men and women should relate to each other in sacred union.

Standing under the chuppah, in the presence of family and friends, as the groom places the ring on the finger of his bride, he says, "*Haray aht mekudeshet lee, betabaat zo, ke'daat Moshe ve'yisrael*: Behold, you are consecrated to me, with this ring, according to the law of Moses and Israel." Each word carries tremendous significance.

The first word is *Haray* which literally means, "Behold!" -- as in, do not ever take each other for granted. May you marvel over the miracle of your love for each other every day. *Haray*, behold: still be startled by each other and appreciate the miracle that in this massive world you have found each other.

*Aht* – you: which in Hebrew, happens to be the first and last letters of the alphabet. If there were an exact equivalent in English it would be as if the word "you" was pronounced "a-z, or az," a to z. I take it to mean that you must love the totality of the other, from a to z. There will be good and bad. No one is perfect. Everyone has faults. There will be good times, and rough times. It will not always be smooth sailing, but love entails accepting our imperfections. In the words of the great popular song, "I love you just the way you are," (which Billy Joel wrote, just prior to leaving his first wife for super model Christie Brinkley.)

*Aht* can also be translated as the word "thou", which brings to mind the work of the philosopher Martin Buber who taught that in a loving relationship we should strive to relate to the other person, not as an object. In other words, when we look only in terms of what we get from the other person, he says it is an "I – It" relationship. Rather we should work to be in what he terms an "I – thou" relationship, where our primary goal is to seek to fulfill not our needs, but the needs of the other. That is holiness, which brings us to the next word.

*Mekudeshet* – we translate the word as "sanctified" or "consecrated." It comes from the root, *kadosh*, holy, reminding us to always see the holiness, the divine image in each other.

*Lee* – to me. You and your beloved have a unique bond, unlike that which is shared by any other two people in the world.

*Betabaat zo* – with this ring. This is what makes the wedding official, when a groom actually gives a ring to his bride and says these words. I take this to mean that you should always be willing to give freely, willingly, selflessly, and often. Do not stop to measure or think about what you have given lately, or what you receive in return. Marriages where each partner is willing to make personal sacrifices for the other partner endure. But for the wedding to be valid, the giving must be accompanied by the words – meaning: don't overlook the importance of what you say and how you say it.

*Kedaat Moshe veYisrael* – according to the religion of Moses and Israel. Let Judaism play a role in your life. Observing the customs and sharing the traditions of our faith can enrich and deepen your lives together. It adds so much and can be so meaningful.

Why does the blessing end “according to the law of Moses and Israel”? One possibility is because Moses and Israel argued and quarreled all the time, and yet they loved each other, were devoted to each other, and never abandoned each other, even when there was contentiousness in their relationship. Forgiveness is another necessary ingredient in a partnership.

I want to conclude with a story I have never told publicly before, about one of my first hospital visits as a rabbi. Newly ordained, I went to a hospital to visit the father of a member from a previous congregation. I had known and become friendly with this man when he had served as an elected official and I was lobbying the state legislature on behalf of the students at the University of Maryland. Now he lay dying in a hospital bed and wanted to see me. Although I was in my late 20’s and he was about 50 years older than me, at that moment I was no longer the young student who had worked with a senior statesman, but a rabbi who he wanted to speak to. He told me that he had lived a good life, but that he wanted me to know about his regrets, especially how much he regretted having had an affair, and leaving his wife to marry the woman. He even went so far as to confess to me how much he missed his first wife, the mother of his children, the woman with whom he had first started his career, and how much he wished that she was by his side now.

It made quite an impression on me, and was something I have never forgotten.

Relationships, especially close ones, love and marriage are never easy. You have to work at it. It demands trust, which can be difficult to reestablish once lost. Relationships can survive many things, but it is never easy to restore trust. There are times when forgiving is appropriate,... and there are times when it may not be. In the end, when we think about the temptations and actions of well known people we read about in the news, it relates to the message of Yom Kippur, and the afternoon Torah reading. There is a message we can all learn from their actions and the Torah portion. It comes down in part, to warn the rest of us of the problems caused by placing ourselves and gratification of our own individual needs first, coupled with not realizing how important it is to control our passions and what happens when we don’t.

Whenever I think about that hospital visit so long ago I think of the words of Kohelet, Ecclesiastes which we will read next Saturday during the Sukkot holiday. The writer advises us to appreciate the futility of life, and counsels that “One should eat and drink and get pleasure with all the gains he makes under the sun, during the numbered days of life that God has given him, for that is his portion.., The race is not won by the swift, nor the battle by the valiant. Enjoy life with the woman you love, all the fleeting days of your life that have been granted to you under the sun.”

May that be our blessing for this new year.

*©Rabbi Stuart Weinblatt  
Congregation B’nai Tzedek  
Potomac, Maryland  
October 8, 2011  
[potomacrebbe@bnaitzedek.org](mailto:potomacrebbe@bnaitzedek.org)*