

Last summer Anne and I visited an Israeli army base with an unusual mission – to integrate anyone who does not quite fit the typical mold into the army. One program helps new *olim* (recent immigrants). There is a track for teens with special educational needs, another for those from minority groups (such as Ethiopians, Druze, Bedouin). The base also trains volunteers from around the world who give up to two years to serve in the Israeli army.

As the base commander spoke, it was hard not to be inspired by the breadth of the Israeli Army's vision, the depth of spirit of the instructors and the selflessness of the young people who wanted to be in world's largest citizen army. One of the most striking things the commander said, however, was not about what was happening on the base. It was a brief observation he made about the difference between the United States and Israel. He lived, he said, for an extended period in this country. Wherever he went the first question people asked him was "What do you do for a living?" It was a surprising question for him, he explained, because in Israel what people generally ask one another first is "where do you (or did you) serve?"

In this off-hand observation about Israeli life I suddenly understood one of the things I love most about Israel. It is not just the sense being in the land of our ancestors. In Israel there is a powerful and ingrained notion of shared giving and mutual responsibility – a concept often wanting in our more individualistic society. To have in mind as one's first question of another, "where do you serve?" reflects a point-of-view beyond oneself. It is about a life that is devoted to something more than one's own interests and needs.

2000 years ago Hillel taught that we should, of course, consider our own needs: **אם אין אני לי מי לי** "if I am not for myself, who will be."¹ The problem is that we live in a society that takes that admonition to the extreme. Just for fun I went online to see how many books Amazon was selling on self-esteem under "religion and spirituality" or "health, mind and body". Any guesses? Over 55,000. On self-realization? More than 18,000. So, how many books on

¹ Pirke Avot 1:4

responsibility? 1300. On giving? 1800. On humility? 800. It's not a scientific study, but it is, I think, telling. Hillel understood that while we do have to begin with our selves, that is not enough: וכשאני לעצמי מה אני "If I am only for myself, what am I?" It is a variant of the same question the base commander in Israel said is the first we ought to ask: "Where do you serve?"

On Yom Kippur we are unencumbered by work, freed from food and other desires of the flesh. This long day gives us the luxury of time to reflect and prayers that challenge us to do honest introspection. Sure, you can twiddle away your time (quite literally on Twitter), even during services. You can be here, but focus on the good-looking person walking by, counting the moments until you leave or let your mind drift. Or you can use today to push yourself a bit, to ask the tough questions of the hour. Where am I in my life? Who am I? When I consider what I've done, am I proud? As we take time later today to remember loved ones who have died, we would do well to ask – how would I want people to remember me? Am I the person I can be ... am I the person I ought to be? What, in short, do I serve?

The prophet Micah suggests three ways we can become the people we ought to be. "It has been told you what is good (and) what God requires of you – to act justly, to love mercy and walk humbly with your God."² As basic as this may seem – it still is a pretty good measure for living the life we ought to live. In these three ways – living justly (or with integrity), being merciful (that is, responsible for others in what we do) and with humility – can we find a way towards a good, worthy and meaningful life.

Integrity

This past year or two it seems like every month there is another sports figure using some performance-enhancing drug, politico apologizing for a sexual indiscretion (OK, almost always some powerful and driven man), or some actor or fashionista drunkenly uttering a racial slur. Whether golf stars or Congressional representatives have to be models of fidelity and sexual

² Micah 6:8

propriety or not, whether or not designers are allowed to be anti-Semites or homophobes, what is clear is that their disgrace when the truth about them is revealed indicates that there is a communal sense that one's outer persona and inner life ought to be aligned.

When Micah speaks about "doing justice", he alludes to the need for balance in one's life; in a word, to have integrity. In many societies a scale symbolizes justice. Discernment and judgment imply weighing all the possibilities of what we do. If we are to move towards who we ought to be, it is important to be balanced in what we do – not only publicly, but privately; not just in what we say, but in our behavior.

In the Talmud, we are taught that there are three types of people that God despises; the first is the one who is **אחד בפה ואחד בלב**, a person whose heart does not match their spoken word or deed, in other words, a person who does not practice what they preach. Whatever we say, it truly ends up being what we do that matters the most. As Ralph Waldo Emerson once said, "What you *are* shouts so loudly in my ears, I cannot hear what you say."

The Torah commands that the Ark of the Covenant with gold plating.³ It makes sense that the outside would be gold, for it everyone to see. Why, though, the need to go to the extra expense to put gold on the inside? To teach us, said one Talmudic sage, that our inner and outer character should be consistent.⁴ Integrity implies a quality of wholeness in one's life – a sense that allows us to create trust with others and balance within ourselves.

A week and a half ago a number of students in a neighboring school district were charged with cheating on the SAT college entrance exam. An aberration? Hardly. A survey by the Josephson Institute on Youth Ethics recently found that nearly 60% of students admitted to cheating on a test in the past year.⁵ Talking about this incident with a friend, I was told that someone he knew said, "Hey, I paid to have someone take the SAT for me

³ Exodus 25:11

⁴ Rabbah in Babylonian Talmud, *Yoma* 72b

⁵ http://charactercounts.org/programs/reportcard/2010/installment02_report-card_honesty-integrity.html

years ago." What is astonishing is not that cheating has been around ... it's that someone had no shame admitting that they "gamed the system." Integrity takes a back seat, I guess, when it comes to getting into the right college. What an indictment on our values. Are we so enamored with success that we prostitute our children's moral character in the process?

When I was still in rabbinic school a seasoned colleague advised that when we consider what we say for someone's eulogy we not just list the public accomplishments of the person who died. Rather, this rabbi taught, listen to what those closest to that person say about how that he or she was with them. It is not our many awards and accolades that last beyond the grave, our wisest teachers understood, only our good name. All of us have a public persona – and that is truly part of who we are. But our truest self is revealed to those closest to us – our children and partners, the colleagues with whom we work. On Yom Kippur we cannot hide. All is revealed – if not to God; if not to the ones with whom we are most intimate, then to our selves.

The first step, then, to being the one you ought to be is to seek greater balance between who you say you are and what you do. Do you say you want to be healthy, but not live in a healthy way? When you rebuke your children or your spouse or your friend, do you think they hear you wanting them to improve their behavior, or just as belittling or scolding? In short, ask yourself: Am I in private the person I am in public? Am I a person of integrity?

Responsibility

A rabbi visiting a Religious School class once heard the students discussing some Bible stories. The rabbi wanted to see what they learned and so asked them, "Who knocked down the walls of Jericho?" A young boy raised his hand and answered, "I don't know who did it, Rabbi, but I can assure you, it wasn't me."

What does it mean when the prophet Micah says that we should "love mercy"? In part, I suggest, "mercy" implies accepting in one's heart that the other may be right and I might be wrong. It is a quality of self-reflection that

accepts that I just might be responsible (if not wholly, at least in part) for my situation in life.

The need for personal responsibility is the very first morality tale of the Torah. Adam and Eve are kicked out of the garden. Why? Many assume it was for eating the fruit. Yet after they ate nothing happens. Rather, God asks Adam, "Why did you eat?" Instead of giving an answer he says it was Eve's fault, for she gave it to him. And Eve? She shifts the blame to the snake. Only after this does God punish them. It is not disobedience, then, that is the great wrong, but the refusal to accept responsibility.

A few weeks ago at the U.S. Open Serena Williams lashed out at the lines judge for a call against her. Even after the game she said, "I don't even remember what I said" and blew off the outburst with "I was just in the zone." Too often we, too, rationalize our misdeeds and failings. "I'm like this because what my parents did." "I'm like this because of what my parents *didn't* do." "I know I say things that are hurtful, but I'm only joking." "I had a bad day." Do we consider the sting of our words, or readily dismiss others as being overly sensitive? Do we look aside at the misbehavior of our children, explaining it as youthful exuberance, pressures at school or the bad influence of their friends? We are experts at denial and deflection, evasion and avoidance, of seeking the wrong in others rather than facing it in ourselves. How easy it is to point the finger at others, but before we do let's remember that when we point at someone else, three of our fingers are pointed back at us.

Yom Kippur, however, teaches that there can be no true turning of the soul, no reaching towards the best in us, without הכרה – a profound recognition of our responsibility for the choices and decisions we make. There are always reasons external to us for what we do, but ultimately we have to own up to what we do – and even doing nothing is a choice for which we must take some responsibility.

A central feature of repentance in Jewish thought is the willingness to admit our wrong. In the Torah one who brought a guilt offering was required

to say, "I confess."⁶ Thus, on Yom Kippur a central feature of our prayers is the verbal admission – the openness to saying "I am responsible for what I have done." When you or I miss the mark – willfully or inadvertently – nothing can make things right without accepting responsibility for the pain we caused.

Some say love means never having to say, "I'm sorry". Right?! Try that on the people you care about. Love means, I would suggest, *always* being prepared to say, "I'm sorry." Regret and remorse are the signs of personal responsibility – and the means by which we show others that we accept the wrongs we have done have hurt them. In every relationship – even the closest ones (maybe even especially the closest ones we have), there are moments of tension, misunderstanding and hurt. The question is not will I have to say, "I'm sorry", but when should I say it ... and how.

Finally, responsibility involves a willingness to do for others – to serve as we can. President Calvin Coolidge once said, "We cannot do everything at once, but we can do something at once." It is a statement remarkably consonant with that of Rabbi Tarfon some 2000 years ago – "It is not incumbent upon you to finish the work, but you are not free from acting."⁷ Instead of waiting for others to act or circumstances to change, then, ask yourself: What responsibility can I take to be the best I can be?

Humility

There's a story about a rabbi who, at the beginning of Yom Kippur, in a frenzy of religious passion rushes in before the Ark, falls to his knees, and starts beating his breast, crying, "I'm nothing. I'm nothing."

The cantor of the synagogue, impressed by this example of spiritual humility, drops to her knees and cries out, "I'm nothing. I'm nothing."

The synagogue custodian, watching this scene from the back of the sanctuary, soon finds he can't restrain himself either. And he too drops to his knees and starts calling out, "I'm nothing. I'm nothing."

At which point the rabbi nudges the cantor with his elbow, points at the custodian and says, "Look who thinks he's nothing!"

Somehow I think that rabbi didn't quite get the point!

⁶ Leviticus 5:5, Numbers 5:7

⁷ Pirkei Avot 2:21

The word "humility" is close to the word "humiliation", but they could not be more different. Humility, in Jewish thought, is not the diminution or lessening of oneself, nor is it inimical to self-esteem. Rather, humility is having proper perspective on what you can do and on the gifts you are given. Rabbi Chaim of Volozhyn, who wrote a commentary on *Pirkei Avot*, once said, "If someone really has not done anything with their life that they can be proud about, the fact that they are humble is not impressive. They should be humble!" Winston Churchill once had a political opponent he did not like very much. Someone said to him, "Winston, at least the man is modest." Churchill responded, "He is a modest. And he has a lot to be modest about!" Too little humility is arrogance, but Jewish thought also says that if you are qualified or excel in a particular ability, denying what you can do is not humility, but too low a sense of self-esteem. Alan Morinis suggests, "Being humble doesn't mean being nobody, it just means being no more of a somebody than you ought to be."

To be humble is to recognize our limits, to see our blessings as a gift and to have a profound sense of the worth of so much beyond our self. No one in this place is without *tsooris*. There are more than enough troubles here to break the heart. Why are some broken by the sorrows of life, while others transcend them? I have yet to find an answer sufficiently satisfying for everyone, but a healthy dose of humility sure helps when times are tough. The reason is that the humble person has no expectation that God or life or anyone owes him or her anything. A few weeks ago my wife, Anne, was speaking to the rabbi I first worked with when I began my career. She expressed that we were not so happy with a decision one of our children made. "You know," he said, "our children were not born to make us happy." His words hit home. Despite the t-shirt saying, "It's all about me!" ... life is *not* all about us.

More than this, humility reminds us that we also cannot have it all. Acceptance of this brings a great inner tranquility – not an end to the

yearning, but a willingness to not be consumed by the envy and jealousy of others. A humble person does not assume that something is owed to him or her, but is grateful for it.

Living with so much, it is easy to take for granted what we have, but humility reminds us to keep things in clearer perspective. As human beings we live in an age when people live longer and healthier than ever before. As Americans we dwell in a land with more freedoms than most people have ever experienced – and which only a small percentage of the world still enjoys today. As Jews we have the gift of living in a time of a strong, sovereign and independent Jewish nation, and are also blessed with the vibrant Jewish lives we need not be there to enjoy.

Humility is not just about a proper sense of self-worth and perspective. It is also involves seeing everyone as worthy. Our traditions teach us to treat every person with dignity regardless of status or station, power or position. This was a lesson also taught by the rabbis of old: **מי הוא חכם** "Who is wise?" they asked **הלומד מכל אדם** "The one who learns (something) from every person."⁸ We cannot be excellent in everything, so it just makes sense to find out what others do that is better than we can ourselves.

The 16th century Jewish mystic, Isaac Luria, said that in order to create the world God had to withdraw, to make space (as it were) for the universe to exist. If God can leave space for others, so should we. To live a life of service is not to do for others what they can – and should – do for themselves. It is to be humble enough to know that not only can we not do it all ... we should not. You may think you can do something better than another, but you will gain more by letting go and encouraging others to be their best. The humble person understands that whatever we seek in life, we serve our ideals best by letting others join us in achieving them.

⁸ Pirkei Avot 4:1

A final thought. To be the people we ought to be is not the search for perfection. We are created with desires and disabilities, hungers and needs. To be a Jew, however, is to use what we have, to rise above moral mediocrity and reach for ethical excellence. This sacred day is a marker to make every day sacred, ennobling our lives and the lives of those we touch.

So, ask yourself the important questions – the one's that will challenge: What do I serve? Am I in private the person I am in public; am I a person of integrity? Do I take responsibility for my actions? Can I accept what is good in myself, but in a way that humbly allows others to also live a life of service? These are the questions of the hour. These are the questions of our lives, the questions that help us be the persons we ought to be.