



High Holy Days 2019
Rabbi Jan Uhrbach

2nd Day Rosh Hashanah
(Part B, Main Teaching)
Love Kindness, Walk Humbly

Let's go back to our text, in which fullness of Torah is distilled to ever fewer mitzvot.

We started yesterday with 1 mitzvah, from Amos, "seek Me and live" -- i.e., the animating essence of Torah, Judaism, meaningful life is seeking; placing our core values front and center, and striving to better embody them. Then earlier this morning we looked at how that 1 essence gets expressed as 2 mitzvot: שְׁמְרוּ מִשְׁפָּט וְעֲשׂוּ צְדָקָה - guard justice and do righteousness.

Now we move to 3 mitzvot, quoting Micah 6:8 (part D):

אָדָם הֲגִיד לְךָ אֲדָם "It has been told to you, oh human." You want to be fully human? A mensch? Then, here's מַה־טוֹב "What is good" וּמַה־יִּדְרֹשׁ מִמֶּךָ "and what Adonai seeks from you." Note the reciprocity with yesterday's verse, "Seek Me (dirshuni)". Now, what does God seek (doresh) from you. This one of the primary meanings of the word teshuvah: response. To do teshuvah is to live one's life as a response to a divine demand.

So what does God want from us?

One: יֵאָמֵר עֲשׂוּת מִשְׁפָּט Only do justice - we dealt with that earlier.

Two (in light blue): וְאַהֲבַת חֶסֶד Ahavah is love. Hesed is kindness, generosity. The Talmud translates the phrase *ahavat hesed* into action: it means deeds of lovingkindness (*gemilut hasidim* (visiting the sick, comforting mourners, extending hospitality, feeding hungry, etc). But reading hyper-literally, it means you should love kindness; it's addressed to our character and inner attitude - what you value.

And three: וְהִצַּנַּע לְפָנֶיךָ אֱלֹהֶיךָ... walk humbly or modestly with your God.

One general observation: here and elsewhere, the Torah seems to be commanding that we have certain feelings. Can emotions like love or a trait like humility be legislated?

Jewish tradition says yes. Like our values and desires, our emotional responses and character traits aren't inherent; we're supposed to consciously choose, form them. We're not in complete control, but neither are we powerless. Torah and Jewish practice seek to shape and transform both deeds and consciousness - each informing the other.

So, e.g., Maimonides in his *Hilkhot Teshuvah* (7:3) teaches that we do teshuvah not only for particular deeds and words, but regarding our character, life orientation, beliefs, and emotional responses. And he talks specifically about not only individuals, but society, each group, and each generation doing teshuvah in this way.

The emotional tones that a community amplifies and normifies matter. For that reason, as with justice and righteousness, the Torah doesn't leave them solely to the individual: the range of emotional reactions that Jewish community treats as normative/appropriate is bounded; not every feeling we have is equally valid.

OK, so let's talk about ahavat ḥesed. I'm guessing all of us would probably say we do love kindness. And knowing this community as I do, I know that's true.

But societally? Not so much. If money is an expression of value, compare how professions dependent on ḥesed are paid relative to those that are driven by competition and conquest, fame or power. Think of nursing and home health care, social work, teaching and child care verses corporate raiders, bankers, football players, movie stars, real estate moguls. Our society is set up to reward cut-throat competition, kindness be damned. And we live in a media culture that is constantly churning anger, contempt, nastiness -- it's what sells.

But it's not who most of us are.

Certainly, we love being on the receiving end of ḥesed! And I don't mean that as a joke. I spoke yesterday about human being's inherent yearning, seeking God - I think if we're honest with ourselves (and it feels vulnerable to say out loud), one of the things we most yearn for is ḥesed - simple kindness.

And I believe we are built with a desire to extend ḥesed to others. The Talmud (Megillah 13a) in discussing the figure of Esther refers to a חוט של חסד -- a thread of ḥesed. I love that image, because it suggests that it's kindness that binds us, stitches us, together. With people we're close to, ḥesed is about extending ourselves for the sake of those we love. In everyday interaction, with strangers, ḥesed is the attitude and action which enables us to feel our shared humanity. And we long for that. We are lonely.

Think about the disproportionate positive impact that connecting with a stranger through simple kindness -- whether giving or receiving -- has on your mood. Just saying hello. Offering a compliment. Offering a hand.

So: to what extent is your ahavat ḥesed -- your love of kindness -- operational for you? How does it manifest in your life, in your intimate relationships, and especially beyond? Look at where you put your energy, time, attention. Practically, where does your love of kindness rank among other desires and "loves", like convenience, comfort, safety; feeling powerful or superior, being rich or important; being right, and protecting your ego? What steps can you take to love kindness more, to express it better, more often, to make it more of a priority?

And even if we personally are embodying the love of ḥesed well, we can't take for granted that without attention, we, or our children, always will. It's easy to get hooked by the anger of the surrounding culture, and respond measure for measure -- to become ourselves angry, contemptuous. It takes conscious effort and attention not to respond, even inwardly, in kind. Instead, *be kind*. Ahavat ḥesed.

Now let's look at #3, walk humbly with your God. What do we mean by humility?

Obviously, not arrogant. Talmud imagines God saying "The arrogant and I can't abide together"

But it's not self-abasement either, nor denial of our genuine gifts. Rather, humility is about the

awareness of our partialness -- especially but not only with respect to what we know and believe. It's the realization that we are limited, that a human being is capable of knowing and expressing only partial truths. That's why we we're always *seeking* God. Not moral relativism, or nihilism -- but openness to being wrong, to changing our minds.

And also, humility is about accuracy in locating our place and value in the world. The sense of ourselves as no less but no more important than any other human, that I spoke of earlier. And holding at one and same time the knowledge of my own unique and inestimable worth, with the awareness that I'm part of something larger.

"Walking with God humbly" is an attitude of attuning one's self to the path and step of something larger than one's self. It's being Ginger Rogers to God's (humanity's?) Fred Astaire -- and your job is to become the best possible dance partner you can be.

Now, *hatzne'a* refers not only to humility but modesty, in the sense of not bragging or tooting one's own horn. It's the opposite of self-aggrandizement, instead letting one's deeds and character speak for themselves.

Modesty is very old-fashioned now. For good reason, we need to make our voices heard, and especially those who historically have been silenced (e.g., women, people of color, LGBTQ people, disabled) are rightly being encouraged to take public, leadership roles. Just as humility doesn't mean self-abasement, modesty doesn't mean hide your talents, or work in secret. Speaking out publicly, promoting causes we're working on, and making visible the good we do can inspire and encourage others and shift culture. If you're "walking with" God, it's good for others to see your path; how God's presence becomes more manifest in our world

It's about our kavannah, our intent and mindset. Not doing what we do *in order* to get attention and fame. And we have to be careful. The publicity/popularity culture that has degraded American society and politics, can be corrosive of our own values too. Facebook likes and re-tweets give you a dopamine hit -- they're addictive.

But the full depth and wisdom of the Micah verse really only emerges through the connection of the parts: do justice *and* love kindness *and* walk modestly with your God. They're connected by the letter *vav*, "and." It suggests that all three are interconnected, each informing the others.

The Talmud reads "walk modestly with God" as instructing *how* to do kindness:

Walk modestly -- this is tending to the dead and welcoming the bride (i.e., when they're poor or have no one else do it). And if these things which are usually done quite publicly (i.e., weddings and funerals are public) the Torah tells us to do modestly/quietly, all the more so deeds of lovingkindness which are naturally done privately (e.g., visiting the sick, feeding the hungry)!

It's such an evocative reading. To love kindness is to value a certain inwardness - *ahavat hesed* is quiet, gentle, no fanfare or drama. Do kindness, love kindness, for its own sake. Not to broadcast to the world, or to be seen by others as a good person.

And it reflects the deep intuition that true *hesed* emerges from modesty: only when the ego's demands for credit and recognition are quieted can we really connect, in a caring and kind way, with another.

And that modesty emerges from kindness. How so? *Hesed* entails empathy, which demands vulnerability. If I approach another with the thought that this other person is vulnerable to what's happening to them, but I'm not -- *I'll* never be in this hospital, *I'll* never be hungry, *I'll* never be a refugee -- then I'm placing myself above the other, and I'm offering pity, not *hesed*. *Hesed* requires connecting as an equal -- this could just as well be me -- which in a thinking/feeling person leads to modesty and humility.

Earlier, I used the very-gendered metaphor of being Ginger Rogers to God's Fred Astaire, and I did so deliberately. I'm very aware that the qualities we're talking about are often associated with women. *Hesed* professions have historically been seen as women's work. And the virtue of modesty -- Micah's *hatzne'ah* -- become known in some Jewish circles as the Yiddish-ized *tzniyus*, applied almost exclusively to women, and oppressively so -- to silence and limit women, keeping us in the house, and invisible. So this verse from Micah is an aspect of Judaism that needs to be reclaimed, but needs significant recalibration in order to do so.

In an essay entitled "A Hero Is a Disaster", feminist thinker and historian Rebecca Solnit, writes as follows:

Positive social change results mostly from connecting more deeply to the people around you than rising above them, from coordinated rather than solo action. Among the virtues that matter are those traditionally considered feminine rather than masculine, more nerd than jock: listening, respect, patience, negotiation, strategic planning, storytelling. But we like our lone and exceptional heroes, the drama of violence and virtue of muscle, or at least that's what we get, over and over, and from it we don't get much of a picture of how change actually happens and what our role in it might be, or how ordinary people matter... [paraphrasing Bertolt Brecht] pity the land that thinks it needs a hero, or doesn't know it has lots and what they look like.

It strikes me that what she's describing is exactly what Micah is saying: getting justice done in the world (עֲשׂוּת מִשְׁפָּט) is really about building caring relationships (וְאַהֲבַת חֶסֶד), and being willing to do the work modestly, outside the public eye (וְהִצְנִיעַ לְכַת עִם-אֲלֵהֶיךָ). Doing what's right and good and what needs to be done, whether or not it will get headlines. Not indulging in the fantasy that to be effective you have to be the lone hero who gets all the attention and credit. Indeed, true modesty/humility -- because it's grounded in the the reality that nobody does it alone -- is actually much more empowering than the ego rush of thinking you have to be the sole savior.

It's not that we don't need individuals to lead - we do. But a hero or villain is always a specific manifestation of something larger -- a movement, or culture. It's just someone -- within a history and a context -- who seizes a moment, or an opportunity.

The point being, not that women are better than men -- but rather, that a healthy reading of Micah envisions these virtues for *all* people, of *any* gender. Not that women should stay home unseen and unheard doing the taking care of and nurturing relationships, while men sally forth as lone warrior heroes to save (or ruin) the world, all by themselves getting all the attention and credit (or blame). That leaves no one fully human, and it leaves the world in a mess.

Solnit continues:

We *need* hope and purpose and membership in a community beyond the nuclear family. This connection is both personally fulfilling and is also how we get stuff done that needs to be done. Lone hero narratives push one figure into the public eye, but they push everyone else back into private life, or at least passive life.

Remember our core animating mitzvah from yesterday: “seek Me and live.” Vitality for your whole being, and for *everyone*, or something’s not right.

We’ve got a long way to go. The fantasy of the lone hero (or villain) -- and its corollary, the cult of celebrity and charisma -- have yielded a society that is the opposite of what our text envisions. It distorts what it means to be masculine and what it means to be feminine, it distorts who gets seen and valued and taken seriously, and who gets ignored, dismissed, distrusted or treated with contempt.

Which takes us two related mitzvot from David’s 11 principles (part B, also in light blue):
8: וְאֶת־יְרֵאֵי יי יִכְבֹּד - honor the God-fearers. This parallels “walk humbly with your God.” To be humble and modest doesn’t mean reject all honor, or don’t afford honor to others; it’s a question of who/what is worthy of honor. A humble person honors those capable of awe, reverence, reticence - *yirat HaShem*.

And #7 נִבְזָה | בְּעֵינָיו נִמְאָס - a despicable (or vulgar, contemptible) person should be abhorrent in your eyes. What makes them despicable? Based on the mitzvah before it, it’s basically someone who traffics in contempt and degradation, who enjoys humiliating others, is respectful of nothing and no one.

And note: Theoretically, this should be a tautology. “You should despise a despicable person.” Well, yeah. But the verse is phrased to suggest there is an objective measure by which someone’s behavior or attitudes make them despicable. What’s at issue is how they’re seen in “your eyes.” The Psalmist well understood that we can’t assume that what should be seen as despicable, will be.

In fact, our prevailing culture often has these reversed. The *yirei Adonai* among us -- the people capable of awe, who aren’t cynical and actually believe in something; those who are reticent, withholding judgment, careful not to cause harm; who work for consensus, walking modestly with others and with God -- are often met with impatience or contempt, seen as weak, or are just unseen. What gets our attention is the opposite -- the ego-driven self-promoter, or worse yet, the despicable sort we’re supposed to find abhorrent. Our society amplifies and admires people who are sharp and cynical, who tear things and people apart. We applaud the “epic take-down” and laud the person who “broke the internet” with some humiliating come-back. We associate destructiveness with strength.

Nivzeh b’einav nim’as. *Nim’as* is to be viscerally repulsed, disgusted. Like the way we respond to maggots, the yucckk, that makes you avert your eyes because you’re a little nauseated. People who are unkind should disgust us viscerally, in our kishkes, such that we need to turn away. Instead, we’re entertained.

It’s symptomatic of what philosopher Martha Nussbaum calls a false social value, which can warp our interior lives. Or what Maimonides (the Rambam) called a sickness of the soul. Rambam was a physician. And he said that just as when the body is ill, it sometimes craves

things that are bad for it and rejects food that is healthy, so too with the soul. I don't have to tell you that the soul of our society is significantly unwell.

The good news is we can heal it. We already are. We are moving in two directions at once: we are becoming crueler and more contemptuous, yes, but also more sensitive, caring, and respectful. More diverse voices are being heard and credited, more diverse faces are being seen.

The healing balm is where we began, ahavat heshed. Cultivating the love of kindness. In small ways, every day. We needn't -- we can't -- wait for the lone heshed-hero to bring justice, kindness, and humility back into our world. It's up to all of us.

Thank God, we're up to the task.

I'll close with a short poem by Rabbi Danny Siegel, entitled, "A Rebbi's Proverb":

If you always assume
the one sitting next to you
is the Messiah
waiting for some simple human kindness
you will soon come to weigh your words
and watch your hands.
And if the Messiah so chooses not to be revealed
in your time
it will not matter.