



High Holy Days 2019
Rabbi Jan Uhrbach

Yom Kippur Day
Integrity: Speaking Truth to Yourself

Going back to our text, the first mitzvah on David's list of 11 (Psalm 15) is הוֹלֵךְ תָּמִים. *Holekh* is walk. *Tamim* has a range of meanings

It can mean complete in the sense of perfect or blameless, complete. But since none of us can be perfect, for our purposes, more like wholehearted, or wholeness; living in an integrated, holistic way, not split off, denying parts of ourselves in order to make our lives "work". Judaism wants us to be whole. Viewing teshuvah as we have been, as a process of reconstructing our selves and our communities, it's like DIY furniture from Ikea: you can't have leftover parts. Well, you can, but it will be lopsided, and less stable.

In our collective teshuvah it's about who gets left out of families, communities, countries, religions in order to make the system "work"? Who are the identified problems, if only we got rid of "them" everything would be great? That's not *holekh tamim*.

And personally, it demands thinking holistically in examining our faults: not singling out some part of us as "bad" and in need of being excised, but instead looking to rebalance our full selves, and redirect negative impulses in a positive direction.

Also, *holekh tamim* is about asking what parts of you have you lost touch with that need to find a place in your life? Last night I talked about listening to voices of others that aren't usually heard, especially those who have been actively silenced, taught that their opinions don't matter. One of the benefits of fasting all day and being here in shul on Yom Kippur is that it gives us quiet time to listen for those voices within ourselves, the ones we've been conditioned to ignore or silence, because they're inconvenient, or embarrassing to us or others, or might require us to change. Time to attune ourselves to our genuine needs and worthy desires, talents and goals, whose urgings get drowned out in the busy-ness of the year.

A second meaning of *tamim* is integrity, in the sense that our inside and outside should match. The great twentieth century Torah commentar Nechama Leibowitz says (on Deut. 18:13) that the opposite of *tamim* is a disharmony between the inner and outer person, between words and deeds. Either projecting a public persona that isn't actually true of us in private - especially presenting ourselves as more virtuous than we are. Or the reverse. We started last week by identifying and assessing our values; as we move through and beyond Yom Kippur, striving to be *tamim* means working to better embody those values, to live in a way that is more consistent with what we claim to believe.

And there's a third meaning of *tamim*: integrity in the sense of honesty, especially with one's self. Last night we looked at the various mitzvot in our text relating to speech, and we left off with one last mitzvah that we didn't talk about but which I want to address now (#3 of David's 11 principles, highlighted in green): speaking truth in one's heart וְדַבֵּר אֱמֶת בְּלִבְבוֹ

It's part of the morning liturgy -- we say this every day:

לְעוֹלָם יְהִי אָדָם יִרָא שָׁמַיִם בְּסִתְּרָם וּבְגִלּוֹי,
וּמוֹדָה עַל הָאֱמֶת, וְדוֹבֵר אֱמֶת בְּלִבּוֹ

A person should always revere God, in private as in public.
And one should acknowledge the truth, and speak truth in one's heart.

The mitzvah to speak truth in one's heart has a lot of overlap with walking *tamim*. It involves e.g., saying what you mean, and meaning what you say; not projecting one thing and feeling another, as well as the unity of word and deed.

It's also about being honest with yourself, to the greatest extent possible.

First about yourself -- your virtues and faults, your actions, your motives, etc. Stripping away the rationalizations and self-justifications, like the anti-Ashamnu we did last night. Also stripping away false humility, inaccurately harsh self-judgments. It's about striving for a true and accurate picture of who you are -- not whitewashing ourselves, but not selling ourselves short either. That's hard enough. For example, it's very hard not to globalize about our selves -- to recognize our faults, mistakes and sins, but not say "I'm a totally terrible person," and to recognize our talents and character strengths, but not say "I'm just completely fantastic in every way."

And, it's a call to strive for honesty about our beliefs, the way we perceive other people, how we respond to issues. It demands acknowledging self-interest and biases, the limits of our actual knowledge, the assumptions we make.

Dover emet bilvavo. The genius of the mitzvah as it's framed in our text and in the liturgy is that it's active: not just acknowledge truth, but speak truth to yourself. Talk to yourself. Why?

We're always talking to ourselves. Every dialogue between two people involves three conversations: the one happening between the people, plus the conversation happening in each person's head. Very often, something along the lines of "when are they going to stop talking so I can say..."

The problem is that we're not always conscious of what we're saying.

For example, researchers like Jonathan Haidt and Daniel Kahneman have demonstrated that most of us make moral judgments in our gut, and then justify them with reasons after the fact. If we're confronted with irrationality or error in our reasons why we believe something or someone is right or wrong, eventually most of us will say something like "I don't why, I just know." Apparently we're built that way. We can overcome that tendency by being conscious of it, but it takes work. "Speak truth to yourself" is a command to consciously counteract our natural reactivity -- to push ourselves to keep challenging our ostensible reasons, to question what we think we know, why we believe what we believe, why we respond as we do.

Put another way, we all have inner narratives that make meaning out of our experience -- made up of stories we've been taught, and stories we've constructed ourselves. Narratives about ourselves and our place in the world, our origins and identities. When you call yourself a Jew, or an American, or a member of your family, what assumptions does that bring with it? What story does that identity activate in you? Narratives about the people in your life: who they are, what they think, how they behave. Narratives about groups of people and their characteristics, about the way the world functions. Paradigms that we fit our experience into.

Sometimes we're not aware of these narratives at all. Sometimes the conversion in our head is one of these narratives, that's been activated; and we're filling in all kinds of blanks and details without being aware of it.

If spoken words create the world, what we tell ourselves -- our inner narratives -- create the lenses through which we encounter and make sense of the world. They dictate what we see and what we don't, what we see as normative and what we see as exceptional, what we credit and what we dismiss.

For example, if your inner narrative is that boys are athletic and girls aren't, then when a girl is a great athlete she's amazing, exceptional; and a boy who's not very good at baseball throws like a girl. It takes mental work to instead say, huh, maybe these aren't the exceptions, maybe my narrative needs revision. Maybe some people are naturally athletic and some aren't, some boys throw like this and others throw like that, and gender isn't the most accurate predictor of anyone's athletic ability. Or, if your narrative is that you're inadequate and unworthy, every success will be the exception.

A friend of mine recently wrote that she felt she was "failing at humaning." I so relate to that -- I think we all sometimes feel we're feeling at humaning. But maybe our narrative is wrong. Maybe to be human is to fail.

"Speak truth to yourself" requires making those internal narratives conscious, so they can be confronted and evaluated. Articulate them to yourself, so you can see which ones are accurate and righteous, and which are factually false, unjust, morally wrong.

By analogy (admittedly a very imperfect one): speaking truth to yourself is like cleaning out the cache on your web browser -- getting rid of the cookies, and cached pages, that drive what comes up in your current searches, skewing what you see. Would that it were as easy to do that for our consciousness -- the assumptions and prejudices we've absorbed, the expurgated histories we've been taught about our families, ethnic groups, countries. But it's hard to bring them to consciousness; they're so deeply embedded. And it's harder still to accurately evaluate them; we're invested in them, and they're self-reinforcing.

Your inner narrative is your roadmap of the world; it dictates where and how you walk. If it's not true, your path won't be either. Imagine if the GPS in your car was based on map data from the 1950s. It wouldn't guide you very well now. But lots of people operate on a theology or understanding of Judaism they absorbed in Hebrew school when they were ten. And many of us are operating on a narrative of American history and values we were taught as kids and haven't seriously questioned or updated since.

Now, if you look at the mitzvot in our text that I've highlighted in green, you'll see that I've grouped in with "walk *tamim*" and "speak truth to yourself" the two prohibitions against taking bribes (And by the way, there's an *al chet* for taking bribes. בְּכִפְתַּ שְׁחָד). Why did I group them together?

Obviously, when we take a bribe we compromise our integrity and commitment to truth for the sake of some benefit. And it would be bad enough if, for example, a judge who took a bribe evaluated the evidence accurately, and then said, "judgment should be for *Ploni*, but I'm ruling for *Almoni* because I've been paid."

But according to the Torah, bribes are more pernicious than that. The Torah (Deut. 18:19) says that a bribe blinds the eye of the wise, and perverts the words of the righteous. It's a great insight.

A bribe affects our senses: what/who we see and don't see, what we hear and credit and what we don't take in. It perverts what we tell ourselves. Staying with the courtroom image, it means that the judge will see the evidence in such a way as to favor the party they've been predisposed -- paid -- to favor. So in the end it's not "I see that *Ploni* is right but I'm ruling for *Almoni*, it's that I've convinced myself that *Almoni* is really right.

Anything we're invested in, that benefits us -- the giving up of which would involve loss -- can be a bribe. Of course financial, material advantage, keeping our jobs. That's obvious. But the ego is constantly bribing us -- it wants to protect itself from embarrassment and shame, from moral injury (the assault on our sense of ourselves as good people), from being wrong. Our worldview, our identity, our emotional investments, all those narratives and paradigms that organize our experience and give our lives meaning -- can function as bribes. And bribes can affect our assessments and opinions of anything.

Stereotypes about other people that uphold our self-image are a kind of bribe that blinds the eyes. They serve to justify why I'm entitled to certain things and others aren't. Or sustain my belief that certain things that happen to those kinds of people will never happen to people like me.

On Rosh Hashanah, I spoke about "walk modestly with your God," in the sense of "don't toot your own horn." Don't toot your own horn, or tout your own mitzvot, even to yourself. Our good deeds and qualities can function as a kind of bribe, clouding our sense of our own merit, or character. "Well, I did this good thing, or I do good things with the money I make, therefore I'm entitled to..." Fill in the blank. Or "*I'm* a good enough person to cut ethical corners without being corrupted." "*I'm* doing it for the right reasons." Or "*I'm* in control." Or, "Judaism is just about being a good person, and I am a good person, so I don't need the discipline of ritual practice and Torah study." Paradoxically, we are most *tamim*/whole, not when we're perfect, but when we're honest with ourselves about all the ways in which we're not.

Speaking truth to one's self is a command not to allow ourselves to be bribed by our own *narishkeit*. To be more conscious, more awake.

In some circles, it's now fashionable to talk about being "woke"; in other circles it's fashionable to make fun of that language. A lot of us do both. Just this Sunday, the New York Times Magazine had an interview with Bill Maher in which he complained about it, because he said it suggests he was previously asleep, and that's insulting! I know what's right and wrong, he said.

True, "woke" is sometimes used in self-righteous ways, as an ideological purity test. That's unhelpful, and unJewish. Judaism lives in nuance and complexity. As I've emphasized, purity is for angels. That's why Torah was given to us and not them, because human beings -- who struggle with the moral murkiness of life -- are the ones who need it.

And yet, what is the classic interpretation of the shofar? Wake up, you slumberers! Jewish tradition says, sorry Bill, you *were* asleep. We all are, or at least we're half asleep, operating on autopilot with maps that could use some updating. "Speak truth in your heart" is an ongoing effort to wake up.

Last night I mentioned as a positive trend that more, and more diverse voices are being heard. One of the most hopeful signs for humanity is that those voices are challenging the completeness and truth of our narratives:

- Confronting the full story of slavery in America and it's aftermath, from post-Civil War Jim Crow to incarceration movement to current reality for Black Americans. If you haven't already done so, read the 1619 issue of the NYT magazine; it's an extraordinary piece of a journalism and a must-read for anyone who wants to begin to understand the ongoing legacy of slavery in this country. And if you think you already get it, ask yourself: is the horror of slavery as real to you as the horror of the holocaust? Because it was indeed every bit as horrific. I'll confess that until relatively recently, it wasn't for me. It felt like ancient history. I knew about it, but didn't really *know*. It didn't feel real.
- Confronting the narrative that disabilities are rare exceptions, that there's one "right" way for human beings to process sensory data, that disabled people are dangerous, can't make decisions for themselves, should be kept out of sight.
- Confronting the full story of the slaughter and oppression of Native Americans. When I was a kid, we learned caricatures in social studies -- we made little dioramas, with teepees. After yontiff, google the Daily Show's sendup of the controversy right here about the tall monument -- the advertising tower -- that the Shinnecock nation put up on Route 27. White people in the Hamptons are outraged at the desecration of the beauty and sanctity of the land, *by Native Americans*. Now there's an inner narrative that could use some updating.
- Confronting the narrative that human beings are sharply divided into two genders -- which, by the way, is not actually the narrative told in Genesis -- and the the full story of misogyny in America, and women's experience.
- And yes, confronting the long history of anti-Semitism in this country.

It's hopeful because the more human voices that are heard, the more complete and accurate the story. The more *tamim* -- whole -- we will all be, the more truth we will all be speaking, to our own hearts and to each other. This is so important -- I can't overstate how much. Just think about how important it is to us as Jews that our story be told and understood, our narrative credited. Everyone, every group, needs that as much as we do.

But no doubt, it's painful, and scary. Because it means changing my inner map, the stories that shape my self image and identity. And because it entails loss.

It's easy to affirm egalitarianism/equality/justice as core values, until practicing them affects us in some way. Until it costs us something. There's loss as we move to rectify injustice and tell more complete stories -- whether it's acknowledging ongoing effects of past oppressions, or injustice happening or continuing here and now. It causes disruption, turbulence and discomfort. It comes at a cost to identity and status. Sometimes it entails financial loss.

For example, if America is going to move through our current crisis in a healthy way (and I'm not talking about a presidency, the crisis in America has much bigger, deeper, and older roots than any one person), whiteness will have to not matter as much. That will have implications for us as individuals, and for the way Jews are perceived in this country (and yes, I'm well aware that not all Jews are white, and that anti-semites don't see *any* Jews as white -- nevertheless).

The moment we're in demands that we act in a way that is, at least on the surface, contrary to our self-interests -- that we not be bribed by them, but instead speak truth in our hearts.

Our study text actually offers a challenging but I think productive way to reframe the perceived loss. Take a look at #3 on Isaiah's list of 3 mitzvot (in part C, #3, white letters on purple): one should abhor (*mo'es*) profit/unjust gain from oppression (מֵאֵס בְּבָצֵעַ מֵעֲשָׂקוֹת).

Mo'es means more than just reject or refuse -- it means to despise, be viscerally repulsed. It's the same word we talked about on Rosh Hashanah, in the context of being disgusted by a despicable person. It conveys the sense of something indigestible, incompatible with who we are. Just as physical disgust is sometimes your body's way of telling you that something is toxic and will make you sick -- so don't eat it! -- moral disgust is sometimes your soul's way of saying the same thing: don't consume it, it's spiritually toxic.

And note that here, moral disgust isn't about things like sexuality, which some religions tend to obsess about. It's about inter-personal ethics: any gain or advantage I have, that I have because someone else was taken advantage of or excluded or oppressed, should disgust me - I shouldn't want it

Again nothing is pure. The old saying about not wanting to eat in the restaurant once you've seen the kitchen applies here too. Is anything, any dollar, entirely untainted? No. But Abraham Joshua Heschel's statement is equally applicable: would that we inspected our dollars for blood spots with the same care that we inspect our eggs.

The most important point is, Isaiah's *mo'es b'veitza ma'ashkot* doesn't say I'm guilty -- it doesn't speak at all to the question of who's doing the oppressing. It's about my integrity, my striving to be *tamim*.

Think about playing sports; you want to win fair and square. If you found out that you won because the game was rigged, you wouldn't want the trophy anymore. It would feel tainted, not right. Acting on our values may entail giving up some advantages, some "trophies". But if we're speaking truth in our own hearts about what our values really are, there are certain advantages we shouldn't want.

Because of course, it's only on the surface that what we're being asked to do is against our self-interest. If we take seriously everything we've said so far on these High Holy Days:

- that the essential animating principle of Judaism is "Seek Me and live," which means seeking vitality for *everyone* -- and that if my vitality involves oppressing others, then whatever I'm seeking isn't God.
- that the search for God gets expressed through guarding justice and doing righteousness, loving kindness, and walking humbly, through speaking truth to others and ourselves, and walking with integrity,

then the losses we're being asked to bear actually ARE in our interests - we have so much more to gain than lose.

It all depends on what we really seek.