

## Returning to Our Highest Values

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As the work of Creation progressed, God got a great idea. Turning the angels in the Divine Court, God said, “Let us make a human, after our image, in our likeness.” The angels weren’t quite so sure that this really was a such a good idea, and a great debate ensued. They each turned to the angel next to them and started to discuss the merit of God’s idea. It quickly became clear that the angels were divided into two camps—one that supported the creation of humans and the other that opposed their creation. Amidst the arguing between the angels, a couple from each side had approached the Divine Throne to try to convince God to follow their advice.

“Do not create humans!” begged the Angel of Truth. “They will lie and twist each other’s words!

“O God, please create humans, “pleaded the Angel of Loving-Kindness, “for they will engage in many acts of care and concern for each other. They will spread love and kindness throughout the world.”

“Don’t listen to Loving-Kindness!” cried the Angel of Peace. “Sure, humans will be loving and kind to the people they like, but you won’t want to get in their way if they don’t like you. Humans

will bring violence and war to the world and destroy your wonderful creation!”

“It’s true,” the Angel of Righteousness calmly added, “humans will lie and bring violence and war to the world AND they’ll bring compassion and kindness. And these will be balanced by a commitment to justice and righteousness. They may fail, at times, to live up to our ideals, but they will seek to do better. Let them be created.”

Knowing that all of the angels were right but that a decision needed to be made, God took the Angel of Truth and cast it down to the earth. Now the votes in the Divine Court were in favor of creating humans and God began to work.

This story, based on a midrash, highlights the enduring challenge of choosing between equally important values when they come into tension with each other. We value both kindness and truth—which do we prioritize? We value both peace and justice—which is ultimately more important?

These particular values have come to the fore in recent years. We see all of them in play in different ways and prioritized by different people and at different times. In the midst of crisis, especially natural disasters, we usually tend toward kindness and

compassion over truth. Just look at the current outpouring of support for Texas in the wake of Hurricane Harvey and for Florida and the Caribbean islands after the devastation of Hurricane Irma. In these early weeks, as people struggle to rebuild homes and lives, as some of my own friends and colleagues wait anxiously for power or a permanent place to live, it doesn't matter what underlying causes led to the destruction, we need to take care of the people whose lives were torn apart.

But it also didn't take long for people to start attributing these disasters to specific causes. Climate change, poor land development regulations, and, if you can believe it, even political support for the LGBTQ community have been touted as reasons for the power of the hurricanes and the extent of the destruction they caused. Currently these theories and wild speculations don't matter so much because they don't change the on-the-ground reality. But as the immediate needs of the victims are addressed, and priorities shift to preventing future destruction, we will need to focus more on determining the truth about what made these hurricanes so devastating. These shifts in priorities are normal and natural and even necessary.

It can be much harder to figure out when to prioritize peace over justice and righteousness and when these priorities should be flipped. Our country is suffering terribly right now from a lack of peace. All sorts of groups have entrenched themselves into their

talking points about the lack of justice they experience and go to battle with each other over who needs more support. But fighting over attention and resources, who's right and who's wrong, just create more turmoil. We need to come together, to find our common goals and work toward them with each other, or we will tear ourselves apart. We may need to let go of some of that righteous indignation to give peace a chance to flourish.

Meanwhile, calls for peace, acceptance, and tolerance mean little to marginalized groups that struggle for the same rights on paper and in practice as dominant groups. Yes, all lives matter, but in practice, as we see in our communities, white lives matter more—whites are acquitted in criminal cases at higher rates, paid more on average for the same work, and directed more frequently to gold-standard medical treatments than people of color, among many other forms of racial bias. Until systemic racism and other forms of racial injustice are addressed and rectified, it will continue to be a challenge to create real peace between white communities and communities of color.

Likewise, as long as women have to fight to assert control over their bodies without the interference of their employers, the government, or other groups or individuals, we will not contentedly accept the status quo for the sake of peace. And we, the Jewish community, will not tolerate Anti-Semitic pamphlets appearing on

our streets or people chanting Nazi slogans—in broad daylight, no less—just because we deeply value peace. Sometimes we have to prioritize justice and righteousness over peace to fulfill our obligation to make this world a better place.

The reality is that kindness, truth, justice, and peace are only a few of the values that we weigh in our lives. Balancing family needs, personal needs, and professional needs can be challenging because all are important. What we want to do and what we should do often come into conflict as well, and sometimes we are even forced to choose between the many things we want to do because there's only so much time in the day. We spend our lives prioritizing and reprioritizing our values and what's important to us. It's a natural part of our growth over the years.

That being said, it's at big moments like milestone celebrations or the beginning of the year that I start to wonder whether I'm living out my values and priorities...or just hoping to get to them at some point. Am I so caught up in doing what needs to be done right now that I don't get a chance to do what's ultimately important to me? I have to admit, I'm probably too afraid of the answer to spend much time thinking about it. It's much easier to busy myself with other urgent matters.

This summer, however, I had an unusual opportunity to reflect on my core values. As the final assignment for one of the courses I took in June, my classmates and I were asked to write our retirement speeches. (Don't worry, I'm not retiring yet!) In addition to making sure that we had read and synthesized the material that we had covered in the course, this assignment was intended to make us think about what is vital to us in our work. To meaningfully complete the assignment, we had to choose how we would want to be remembered at the end of our careers. Interestingly, we were told specifically not to reference details about projects we imagined that we would undertake, but instead to focus on the qualities and values that guided our work.

I won't lie, it was a difficult assignment to complete—it's hard enough to summarize a career that's at its end, let alone one that exists mostly in my imagination—but it was a powerful one. It forced me to articulate my highest values as a person and as a leader, among them curiosity and an openness to learning, strength and flexibility, acceptance without complacency, and respect.

But as challenging it was to write this retirement speech, it is even harder to take it to heart. Now I have to be willing to admit where I'm not living up to my ideals. Now I need to consider what I need to change in my work and in my life to live out my values. Now I can't avoid the changes I need to make by pleading busy-ness and

ignorance. And it's so much easier to just continue to follow the path I'm already on!

Whenever my teacher and mentor Rabbi Richard Levy would teach about the High Holy Days, he would start by drawing a squiggly path, with twists and turns, rough patches and puddles. This, he would say, is the path of life. Sometimes it's smooth and straight and life is easy. Other times we face challenges that we have to overcome in order to keep moving forward, or we thought we were heading to one place and ended up going somewhere else. We don't know what our path looks like, but our parents, our teachers, and the Torah all serve as guides to help us along the road.

Then he would draw arrows leading off the path. Each one reflected a different Hebrew word for "sin," most of which share roots with other words that mean "straying from the path." Few, if any of us, manage to stay on our paths for our whole lives. We stray or get distracted or think we're following the right path until all of a sudden we realize that we're totally off course. But we can always turn back—that's *t'shuvah*, repentance.

I love this imagery and now I share it when I teach about the High Holy Days, but it's missing one piece: we too have the ability to guide ourselves along our paths and back to them when we stray. Our parents, our teachers, the Torah can help us along the way, but

they really help us learn how to do our own course-corrections. As adults, it is up to us to make sure that we continue down the right path to the destination we envision for ourselves, lest we find ourselves somewhere unexpected and have no idea how we got there. And this is where clarifying our values and priorities and changing our behavior as needed helps us turn back to our true path.

At the beginning of our service we sang the words, “Return again, return again, return to the land of your soul. Return to who you are, return to what you are, return to where you are born and reborn and reborn.” The song transitions into the last line of the Torah service, a verse from the end of the Book of Lamentations that appears and reappears in our High Holy Day liturgy: “*Hashiveinu Adonai eilecha v’nashuvah*—Help us turn, Adonai, to You, and we shall return.”

Though we make wrong turns and take detours and explore places off of the path of our true self, Jewish tradition teaches us *teshuvah* is always possible, that we can always, even up to the last day of our life, turn back—to God, to ourselves, to the values that we might leave behind when we go astray. The question is, do we? Do we make the effort to discover what our highest priorities are? Do we consider what we need to do to live out those values? And once

we know what we need to do, will we turn back even when it's difficult?

I intend to use these Days of Awe, this time from Rosh HaShanah through Yom Kippur and even through Sukkot and Simchat Torah to figure out how to get back to the path where I can live out my core values and honor my priorities. I invite you to join me in this process, whether you choose to reflect during our services or when you have a few moments' peace and quiet. And I think I can speak for Rabbi Gibson and Cantor Berman in saying that any of us would be happy to guide you through that reflection and to walk beside you as you return. May the challenges of this personal growth work flourish into blessings of happiness, wholeness, and peace.

I wish for all of you a *shanah tovah um'tukah*, a good and sweet year, filled with love and laughter, strength and support, and above all, health, wholeness, and peace. *Kein y'hi ratzon*, may this be God's will.