

Last spring at the conclusion of a graveside funeral service, a woman who found the Jewish tradition of covering the casket with earth to be particularly moving, took me aside and said, “Burying this person as we did, with this deed in which we enacted a *kindness* that expected no reward and anticipated no ‘thank you,’ this single mitzvah,” she said, “just saved my life.”

She was commenting on the rare, cleansing impact of enacting *chesed shel emet*, true loving-kindness, and of how she felt as if she was breathing a larger air generated by pure, unconditional goodness.

In our tradition, we have two different ways of understanding truth, *emet*, a word elevated by local universities as a motto. First, of course, it is the absence of falsehood. But there is this second definition of *emet*, truth, where a good deed is entirely separated from our ego, from any sense of instrumentality, called by some the *emesser emes*, a higher truth because it lives outside the reach of any self-interest.

Now it’s perfectly natural to look at reality *with* self-interest. But when *people* for us become nothing more than *human resources*, when the *beauty of nature* becomes nothing more than *natural resources*, and when *knowledge* becomes nothing more than *information resources*, then we have closed ourselves off to a dimension of what it means to be fully alive. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel taught that when we look at things and at people *only* in terms of how they can be *of use* to us, then we, in the end become less useful to ourselves.

Truth is both *within* us and *beyond* us. Both kinds of truth serve as a bulwark against this worldview where everyone and everything is a tool, which eventually degrades us to little more than tools as well. I’ve spoken to you many times before about the first kind of truth, the one *within* us where we do things that grow our souls. The second kind of truth, the one that lives *beyond* us, I have never addressed with you before tonight.

First, our first truth, you will recall, knows the difference between deeds done in the spirit of gaining advantage, with an eye toward favor exchange, and deeds done with no expectations, with a loving, selfless spirit. Being candid with ourselves about the *difference* is important. Heschel claimed that “One of the major inclinations in every human being is a desire to be deceived.” Self-deception, telling ourselves “everything is fine” when we know it is not; or letting others tell us that our military policies are always just, when we know better – demands that we embrace the first kind of *emet*, truth, by being honest with ourselves about the purity of our motivation.

The current phenomenon of grass roots rallying against Wall Street seems to be but the latest way in which masses are rejecting the status quo of political leadership. We’ve seen it in the Tea Party. As we’ve seen it more recently in masses in Tel Aviv. No matter where you stand ideologically or politically, we all need to be wary of self-deception. Deep down, what is our true motivation? What are we representing? Why? For whom?

We all know the difference when our acts help us *grow in soul*, having nothing to do with calculation, quid pro quo, or instrumentality. Think of the joy you feel when you've shared with your child something you love, playing catch on the baseball diamond, the look on their face when the kite flies into the air after a gust of wind, the nachas you feel when they do something that touches you deeply. We've talked before about the quiver of a good feeling you get inside when you go out of your way to do something helpful or generous. And we've talked about the cleansing sensation of forgiving and of being forgiven, of traveling lighter this year, letting go of baggage filled with justified grievances. All of these 'spiritual goods' dilate the soul.

This first kind of truth *within* us we try to remind ourselves to pursue throughout the year. But the *second kind of truth*, which requires us to leave ourselves behind, is a much more rare, for many of us a-Yom Kippur-only kind of endeavor. Like the *chesed shel emet* at the graveside, this second kind of *emet* has esteem for the intrinsic, non-utilitarian value of a mitzvah. But this year for the first time, I want to ask you to consider something that is less familiar and perhaps even less comfortable for some of you, to join me to contemplating what it might feel like to engage in an act for the sake of our second kind of truth, where rather than imagining it as orbiting around *our* axis, we imagine it orbiting around *God's*. This is a posture not of a swelling soul inside us, but of indebtedness, evoking a response to something or some-One outside, larger than ourselves. It requires a recognition that life is not only about *claims made by me* but also about *claims made upon me*. It invites for Heschel an image of all the things of nature standing with their backs to us, and their faces turned toward God. It conducts a radically different rapport than one of contractual self-interest.

My teacher and friend Rabbi Harold Kushner tells a cute story about a time when he and his wife Suzette were about to tour the Hawaiian Islands by propjet. The passenger compartment was very small and the only other couple was anxious about going up. When the woman from the other couple recognized Harold, she breathed a sigh of relief. "Oh, Rabbi Kushner, I am so glad you'll be flying with us. You'll make sure nothing bad happens won't you." "Please don't count on me" Rabbi Kushner replied, "I'm in sales not management."

Selling religion. Trying to convince you that sacred *sources* can become *resources*, is part of what rabbis do. But it is not the essence of what we do. I very much appreciate the recent books in response to the new atheists by Rabbis Jonathan Sacks (*The Great Partnership*) and David Wolpe (*Why Faith Matters*). The former is rich in new Torah and reasoning, the latter is compelling in its eloquence. But as much as I get out of these books, they both invariably end up making a case for religion based upon *what it can do* for us. To be fair, this is only natural given that their audience is both highly skeptical of religion's faults and tends to evaluate things in utilitarian terms. What I am asking us to *suspend* tonight is the notion that we reduce *religion itself* to nothing but a functional resource.

To completely shift from the egocentric to the theo-centric, how is it even done? Author Iris Murdoch offers us a personal account of what she calls *unselfing*. “I am looking out of my window in an anxious and resentful frame of mind, oblivious to my surroundings, brooding perhaps on some damage done to my prestige. Then suddenly I observe a hovering baby falcon. In a moment, everything is altered. The brooding self with its hurt vanity has disappeared. There is nothing now but the hovering falcon. And when I return to the thinking of the other matter it seems less important.”

*True* love can also involve unselfing. When we place the orbit of a child or a spouse above our own, we call the love ‘true’ because it reminds us of the unconditional, unrewarded kindness of a graveside burial. Perhaps this is another reason why our ‘love note to God,’ also known as the Shema, is always followed by the word *emet* – it is *true* love we seek.

When we pray *v’tahair libeinu l’ovdecha be-emet*, “purify our hearts to worship You, God, in truth” we aren’t only asking for sincerity in our devotion. The *truth* in *be’emet* here reminds me of the *chesed shel emet* at a graveside. We are also asking for un-selfing in our prayers. This might mean experiencing, for just a second, the notion that *our* thoughts about God are actually a *poke from God* to us.

For Heschel, the arrival of true prayer is not to know God but to *be known by God*, to become a *thought of God*. He offers an illustration. “A person may go on pondering deeply in intense emotion about his needs, about the need of the moment. That is not yet prayer. Adding “in the name of God” will not make it prayer. It is the cry of anguish which becomes a realization of God’s mercy that constitutes prayer. It is the moment of a person in anguish *forgetting* his anguish and thinking *instead* about God and His mercy. That is prayer. Not self-reflection, but the direction of the entire person upon God.”

This shift where we go from imagining *we’re* the one’s thinking about God, to a realization that it is we who are being *stirred by God*, for Heschel is not just some luxury. It is a necessity. Because when we encase the value of all reality within ourselves, unattached to anything beyond ourselves, then we end up living lives devoid of responsiveness and responsibility to God or to other people. Life is not just about what we *accomplish* but also about what we *contribute*.

Seeing the ego as an *end* in itself is as nonsensical as believing that the stars we’ll gaze at when we leave this sanctuary tonight somehow require or depend on our approval. Heschel reminds us that “The greatest beauty grows at the greatest distance from the ego.”

In an era that prized *self-expression*, Heschel insisted instead on *self-attachment*. “As a tree torn from the soil, as a river separated from its source, the soul wanes when detached from something greater than itself.” Yom Kippur is the day, not simply of detaching ourselves from bodily hungers, but also of re-attachment for the soul.

One final point Heschel makes about such un-selfing: “Responsiveness to God cannot be copied.” Heschel concludes, “It must be original with every soul.” In other words, if and when any of us experiences being a thought of God, my experience will be unlike the experience of the person seated next to me. One of us might just feel grateful to leave behind her ego for just a few minutes. Another among us might feel glad to just be listening, instead of talking in our heads all the time. And yet another might be willing to engage in this thought experiment, and then stumble upon a spark of creativity as a result.

For you economists in the room, admittedly, these are all benefits. At some level, this is a form of sales, the usefulness of religion that Heschel’s sympathy for Divine pathos sought to contain. Yet, one could retort: if doing mitzvot purely for the sake of the mitzvot would feel miserable and dreadful, in addition to being impractical, who would do actually them? Moreover, for Judaism to un-self isn’t to be anti-self. Loving self is not a sin. To the contrary, as we’ve said, self-interest and self-care are important. The sages of Pirke Avot ask: ‘If I am not for myself who will be?’ And, if I don’t love myself, then fulfilling the command of *loving my neighbor as I love myself* won’t be too helpful for my neighbor. So we must be willing to concede some levels of resourcefulness simply because we are blessed with a religion that loves joy and toasting *L’chaim*. Yet this is a far cry from the *ma betzah* “*what can be gained*” profiteering so at odds with biblical prophetic faith.

I want to consider one final example of *emet*, truth, in the words of the blessing after a Torah portion is read. We thank God for giving us *Torat emet* a Torah of *emet*, which might mean both of our types of truth: a Torah free from falsehood and self-deception, and 2) a Torah which can be learned *lishma*, for Torah’s sake, for heaven’s sake, for non-utilitarian reasons. The blessing continues, *v’chayei olam nata b’tocheinu*, “And has planted within us eternal life”. If we pay close attention to the connecting word, we can see that *Torat Emet* actually causes the eternal life implanted within us to flower. When we learn and *live* sacred texts without any utility or agenda, for their own sake, then we brush up against the eternity, the *chayei olam*, that God has planted inside us.

We’ve seen applications of *emet* to 1) *chesed* with the graveside *chesed shel emet*, to 2) *avodah*, ‘devotional prayer’ when we pray *l’ovdecha be-emet*, and to 3) Torah in *Torat emet*. What comes as a powerful epiphany for me is the realization that the three pillars on which the world stands according to Pirke Avot: Torah, Avodah, and G’milut Hasadim – all three pillars are presented in our tradition as things we aspire to fulfill with *emet*.

The truth *within* us and the truth *beyond* us – both have the power to save our lives. The first truth within us that has us seeking higher ground to quicken and enliven our souls, and the second truth that has us, every now and then, trying to attach ourselves to a different axis, entering an orbit not our own that is much more vast and consequential, an orbit astir with a sense of expectedness.

Trying to do this is important – for me it is particularly important tonight. Rabbi Sacks tells about the Lubavitcher that makes clear why. A man once wrote to the Rebbe, “I need the Rebbe’s help. I am deeply depressed. I pray but find no comfort. I perform the commands but feel nothing. I am finding it hard to carry on.” The Rebbe sent a compelling reply without writing a single word. He simply circled the first word of every sentence in the letter, the word “I”. He was conveying that the person’s self-preoccupation was at the root of his depression. Last year, I suggested that for us as a Jewish people, the door to covenantal fulfillment always opens *outward*. Now, tonight, I am more convinced than ever that this is true for our personal fulfillment too.

A rabbinic dictum about the Hebrew month of Av which contains the most recent and only other full day fast in the Jewish calendar, *mishenichnas av, mimaatim b’simcha*, “upon entering the Hebrew month of Av one minimizes joy.” Erica Brown brings an elegant reading of this maxim offered again by the Lubavitcher Rebbe: by pausing with a full stop between the two last words, it is read instead, *we minimize...with joy*. That full stop makes all the difference. So when we *minimize* ourselves, we can experience deep and surprising joy. As an aside, I believe God must do this all the time, making space for our freedom. So if we try it every once in a while, we might just be living in God’s image. Again it may only last an instant, but as we pray *ki l’olam hasdo*, it can grace us for a lifetime.

It may seem surprising that on Yom Kippur, a day when so many of our prayers demand that we scrub our insides, that I am asking us to unself in this way. Yet, engaging in self-scrutiny from the outside, with a loving, merciful Partner, can help in more ways than we’d ever imagine.

An Argentinian poet tells a story of a young man flees to find himself in a poor neighborhood of Bombay, amidst the vilest class. To hide himself among them, he becomes like them. One day in the middle of a conversation, he senses in one of the people a tone of voice, an inflection that does not belong. “All at once – with the miraculous consternation of Robinson Crusoe faced with a human footprint in the sand – he perceives a *tenderness*, an *exaltation*, a *silence* in one of the abhorrent men.” He continues, ‘It was as if a more complex interlocutor had joined the dialogue.’”

In this setting of sublime holiness in this sacred community of prayer tonight, may we sense in our prayers here and now, the momentous decorum that suggests that not only a more complex interlocutor, but a more *merciful* interlocutor, a more *forgiving* interlocutor, a more *loving*, more *timeless and true* interlocutor has saddled up alongside us. And may that realization *warm our faith* and inspire us to self-surpassing acts of intrinsic goodness in the year we have just begun.