



Matot-Mas'ei Honesty & Integrity

Every so often, I come across a sentence of another person's writing which expresses one of my own thoughts in a language far superior to my own. Over the years, I have contemplated and written about the concepts of "honesty" and "integrity" and the difference between the two.

But never was I able to articulate their precise definitions and the difference between them as cogently and as concisely as in the following passage from Stephen Covey's *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*:

"Integrity includes but goes beyond honesty. Honesty is... conforming our words to reality. Integrity is conforming reality to our words - in other words, keeping promises and fulfilling expectations. This requires an integrated character, a oneness, primarily with self but also with life."

Honesty for Covey, and I for one heartily agree, is the virtue describing reality exactly as it is, of telling the truth. In this day and age, when there is so much confusion as to

whether or not there even is such a thing as truth, it is refreshing to see the place of honesty restored to the list of important human virtues.

For Judaism, truth, EMET, is more than just a virtue. It is one of the three fundamental principles, along with justice and peace, upon which the world stands. In the words of the Talmud, "The signature of the Holy one, blessed be He, is truth."

Ed. note: Rabi Chanina said it; found in Shabbat, Yoma, and Sanhedrin.

So rare is the man of truth that legend has the aged Diogenes searching for him with lanterns. But as rare as the trait of honesty is, the trait of integrity is even more difficult to find.

Integrity is the ability not only to say what you mean, but to mean what you say. Following Covey, it is the quality of conforming one's actions to one's words, of reliably following through on one's commitment. It is more than the ability to make things happen. It is making your own promises happen!

This week's double Torah portion, Matot-Mas'ei, opens with a lengthy and intricate discussion of the concepts of "the vow". Biblical teachings insist that the words we express must be taken very seriously; indeed, we are taught that our words are sacred. Once a person, man or woman, young or old, simpleton or

scholar, utters a commitment, he or she is duty-bound to honor that commitment. MOTZA S'FATECHA TISHMOR V'ASITA - "That which your lips express must be honored and performed."

As helpful as is Covey's succinct definition of "integrity", it is also deceptively simple. There is so much more that we need to know about integrity. And about "honesty", for that matter.

For one thing, honesty and integrity are not just descriptors of individual persons' characters. Rather, they are social values, which ideally should define the essence of human communities and entire societies. From a Jewish perspective, "honesty" and "integrity" cannot be restricted to individual paragons of virtue, tzadikim and holy men, but must become universal cultural norms.

This is why the laws of vows, unlike all the other laws of the Torah, are explicitly given to RASHEI HAMATOT, the chieftains of the tribes. It is to emphasize that the sanctity of speech is not just a goal for a few spiritually-gifted individuals. It must be enunciated as one of the essential mores of the entire tribe.

The Talmud relates the story of an immortal community, a legendary village that knew not death. This was because no one there ever lied. This idyllic existence came to an abrupt end, however, when a young person,

eager to protect the privacy of his parent, told an inquiring visitor that his parent was not home. A harmless and well-intentioned remark, common to us all. A white lie, perhaps, but a lie nevertheless, and one which ruined forever the eternal life of that fabled village.

Yet another lesson about keeping our word is taught in the opening verses of this week's Torah portion (Bamidbar 30:1-17). Sometimes, we overextend ourselves and make promises that we cannot possibly keep. In moments of extreme urgency, or sublime inspiration, we are wont to express commitments that are beyond our capacity to fulfill.

Can a vow thus expressed be annulled? The Torah, ever practical, answers "yes!" and describes some of the procedures designed to release a person from his or her vows. The Talmud, in an entire tractate devoted to this topic, specifies the circumstances and conditions under which such a release can be obtained.

Most well-known among the "ceremonies" releasing us from our personal vows and promises is the Kol Nidrei prayer which ushers in our most hallowed day, Yom Kippur. Not really a prayer in the ordinary sense, Kol Nidrei is a statement in which we declare our past vows null and void. This custom is experienced by many as strange and as an offense to the

value of integrity. But I personally have always found that it reinforces the role of integrity in my life and in the lives of all of us who live in the "real world".

During the entire year, you and I make many commitments and resolutions. With the noblest of motives, we promise things to our loved ones, verbally establish objectives to improve the world around us, or simply vow to lose weight, stop smoking, or start exercising.

As the year wears on, situations change, priorities shift, and we ourselves become different. At least one time each year, on Yom Kippur, we realize how unrealistic we were and that we erred in our assessment of what we could accomplish. And so, we ask that the Almighty release us from these impossible and often no longer relevant commitments, and begin with Divine help a new slate, hoping that the next time we make a promise, it will be one that we will be able to keep.

Judaism teaches us the primary importance of keeping our word. But it does not lose sight of our human frailties and limitations and recognizes that often it is not moral failure that explains our lack of integrity, but simple human weakness, hopefully rare and surely forgiven by God.

Integrity is a cherished value for the society at large. The acknowledgment of human limitations in maintaining integrity must be accepted. These are two important and timely lessons from this week's Torah portion. 📌