

“Teaching the Heart What It Already Knows”

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“You shall be holy; for I, Adonai, am holy.”ⁱ This week’s Torah portion begins with an inspiring, if frightening, commandment. We are not God, so the fact that God is holy is hardly proof that mere humans are even capable of striving for holiness.

At the end of tonight’s service, though, we shall sing “*B’tzelem Elohim*,” a song that proclaims that each and every one of us was created in God’s image. As Dr. Alan Morinis has observed, “Our spiritual ancestors recognized a paradox in the Torah’s injunction to be holy: This verse directs us to become holy, and yet the description of the creation of humanity in Genesis 1 challenges that idea. Since we are made ‘in the image and likeness of God,’ whom we call the Holy Blessed One, aren’t we already holy?”ⁱⁱ

Morinis prescribes the practice of *Mussar*, Jewish ethical discipline, designed, in the words of Rabbi Eliyahu Lopian, to “mak[e] the heart feel what the mind knows.”ⁱⁱⁱ

We do not need to read the Torah to know the obligations we heard tonight: We should regard our elders with respect.^{iv} We must treat everybody equally, particularly those considered strangers among us.^v We must be ethical in our business practices, never stepping on the scale to sell less than the gallon of gas or pound of tomatoes advertised.^{vi}

Still, all too often, we are lax in observing these commandments. The person who moves quickly may be annoyed by the slower elderly person in the grocery store. If we can get away with charging more or paying less than we should, we will often seize the opportunity. And don’t get me started on the ways in which our society treats those it defines as “other,” and not only because of immigration status.

How do we teach ourselves to do what we already know?

An earlier section of our portion, which Justin plans to read tomorrow morning, teaches us to revere our parents.^{vii} I may be about to violate that sacred obligation, as I tell a story about my father, unauthorized, in his presence. I’ve heard many of you marvel at my father’s extraordinary good health, typically and

not incorrectly attributed to his diet and exercise regimens. Just today, Carol Parham ran into my dad in the mall, and reacted in wonder to how fast he was walking. I can't keep up with him.

My kids will tell you, though, that Grampy walks faster than he drives. I can explain. You see, when I was a kid, Dad read a book, *Type A Behavior and Your Heart*. I have no idea what's in that book, though I'm pretty sure that my own cardiac health is dreadfully compromised by my Type A personality. Dad took the book seriously. One night, at dinner, he told us that he learned that he needed to stop driving through yellow lights. The book suggested an exercise, not meant to excise an innate personality trait, but to modify behavior that acts upon it. Dad informed us that, from that point forward, if he ever drove through a yellow light, he would then drive around the block, slowing his progress much more than if he had stopped at the light. While I have no recollection of ever being in the car when he did that, I also have never seen him drive through a yellow light since.

Dad didn't know it, but he was engaged in *Mussar* practice, training his heart, through his behavior, to behave more patiently. Perhaps, in the process, he became more patient; perhaps, not. Judaism is not so concerned with our impulses – instead, our tradition acknowledges that each of us harbors *yetzer hara*, the evil impulse. Our goal is not to obliterate that inclination, but the negative behavior that results from it.

This week's Torah portion begins with the general and seemingly unattainable injunction to be holy, but then it jumps immediately into commandments: Keep Shabbat!^{viii} Revere your parents!^{ix} Don't steal!^x Pay your workers on time!^{xi} Set aside some of your earnings for the neediest among you!^{xii}

Some may be disappointed. They ask: "Why doesn't Judaism remain on a lofty, spiritual plane?" Even worse to some, Judaism veers into areas that some call political and which are certainly – some would say, tragically – subject to public debate today: "When strangers reside with you in your land, you shall not wrong them. The strangers who reside with you shall be to you as your citizens; you shall love each one as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt."^{xiii}

More than a compendium of beliefs, though, Judaism is a set of *mitzvot*, or religious obligations. We must "practice" our religion the same way that my father practiced at behaving patiently. We will not get it right the first time, and certainly not every time. We may have to drive around the block a time or two

before we train ourselves to behave the way we already expect of ourselves in our hearts.

Tomorrow morning, Phillip and Justin will teach us about revering parents. That verse, that commandment, one of the “top ten,” isn’t what most people think: It’s not about children doing whatever their parents say. We aren’t even commanded to love our parents, as if such an emotion could be required. Instead, we are enjoined to care for our parents in their old age – specifically, to assure that they have adequate food and drink, to provide assistance if they can’t dress themselves, and to get them where they need to go.^{xiv} For some, fulfilling that commandment comes easily. For others, the challenge is greater. Not everything Judaism asks of us is easy. Training ourselves to be holy requires hard work.

Ours is a demanding religion. Beginning with the blessing of being created in God’s image, we are expected to embody God’s holiness. We do so through righteous living, performing the *mitzvot*, so that we might teach ourselves to live as we already know we should.

Amen.

ⁱ Leviticus 19:12.

ⁱⁱ Alan Morinis, DPhl, and Rabbi Barry Block, “Mussar and the Development of Spiritual Practices,” in Dana Evan Kaplan, PHD, Editor, *A Life of Meaning: Embracing Reform Judaism’s Sacred Path*, New York: CCAR Press, 2018, pp. 494-5.

ⁱⁱⁱ Rabbi Eliyahu Lopian, *Lev Eliyahu*, 1975, p. 1. Citation provided by Dr. Alan Morinis.

^{iv} Leviticus 19:32.

^v Leviticus 19:33-34.

^{vi} Leviticus 19:35-36.

^{vii} Leviticus 19:3.

^{viii} Ibid.

^{ix} Ibid.

^x Leviticus 19:11.

^{xi} Leviticus 19:13.

^{xii} Leviticus 19:9-10.

^{xiii} Leviticus 19:33-34.

^{xiv} Kiddushin 31b.