

“Why do you teach publicly?” the man asked Rabbi Akiva. It was not such an unreasonable question given the times. Rebellion against harsh Roman rule was again in the air with great hopes for Bar Kochba to be the long awaited messiah, the man meant to restore Jewish self-rule in Israel. “You know the penalty for teaching Torah is death and a painful one.” Akiva answered with a parable: Once there was fox who observed some tasty looking fish swimming this way and that in the water. “Why do you swim to and fro like that?” The fish answered: “we fear being caught up in the nets of Man.” “The answer is simple,” replied the fox, “come up here on land and you will certainly avoid the nets.” “In the water, we risk death; yet to leave the water is certain death.” Torah is *mayim chayim*, the living waters in which we are immersed. We may risk death to study Torah but we face certain death if we abandon Torah. Torah and Jewish values, according to Akiva, are inextricably part of who we are and to leave them behind is a kind of death of the soul.

A man approached Shammai and asked to be converted to Judaism on the condition that Shammai teach him about Judaism while standing on one foot. Shammai took his builder’s square and began to hit the man, driving him away. “Who are you to put conditions on how and what I teach?” Then the man approached Hillel and asked to be converted to Judaism on the condition that Hillel teach him about Judaism while standing on one foot. Hillel immediately converted the man and stated, “That which is hateful to you, do not do to others; all the rest is commentary. Now, go and study.” The man studied with Hillel and became wise in Torah.

Akiva knew that Judaism is not separable from our selves. That is, we cannot survive without Torah and Jewish values because they define who we are. A person can be a pastry chef, but if they happen to also cook up a really terrific brisket, they’re still a good pastry chef. If we abandon Torah, cease to espouse Jewish values, can we still say that we’re Jewish? Hillel similarly recognized that our inner and outer being must be aligned. If we don’t like being treated in a certain way, we cannot turn around and treat someone else in the same way that we ourselves don’t like being treated. Our inner person must be congruent with our outer actions. I wonder what Akiva and Hillel’s reactions would have been to those who say we that we have one set of values for how

we act here in the Sanctuary, another for how we run the Synagogue and yet a third for when we conduct our business in the wider world.

I don't know about you, but "because I said so" never really was a satisfactory answer for why I had to do something. Apparently, I was meant to be a rabbi because they too were unsatisfied with "because I said so" as an answer for why God commanded a particular action. Not stealing, okay, pretty self-explanatory. Not eating pork? Maybe, they reasoned, it had to do with food-borne illnesses. *Shaatnez*, the prohibition on mixing linen with wool fibers in clothing? Not so clear cut. It's one those things we're just supposed to wait and ask Elijah about when he comes accompanying the messiah. I – have a theory. The prohibition on mixing linen and wool is to physically remind us that we shouldn't try to be two things at one time. If fringes on our garments are meant to remind us of the commandments, then making sure that the garment is made out of only one type of fiber can remind us to be internally consistent and true to ourselves.

Similar reasoning explains the controversial verse, Leviticus 18:22, which states: "Do not lie with a male as one lies with a woman; it is an abhorrence." Had this verse been intended simply to prohibit homosexual relations, it would have read: "Do not lie with a male," period. The fact that Leviticus 18:22 includes the phrase "as one lies with a woman" is indicative of further meaning. After all, the prohibition on murder is "you shall not murder," period. Not "you shall not murder with a knife." Therefore the verse can be interpreted, "if you are inclined to lie with women, do not lie with men." And, "if you are inclined to lie with men, do not lie with women." One should be true to one's inclinations, faithful to one's self.

Honesty and faithfulness to one's self and to others is highly valued in Judaism, so highly that it shows up twice in the 10 Commandments: "you shall not swear falsely by the name of the Eternal your God." And "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor." Ultimately the One to whom we must be true and consistent is God. Throughout the Bible we are warned to worship God and God only. We are told repeatedly not to worship other gods whom we have not experienced either publicly or especially in secret. Deuteronomy 29: 15 – 18: "Well you know that we dwelt in the

land of Egypt and that we passed through the midst of various other nations; and you have seen the detestable things and the fetishes of wood and stone, silver and gold, that they keep. Perchance there is among you some man or woman, or some clan or tribe, whose heart is even now turning away from the Eternal our God to go and worship the gods of those nations – perchance there is among you a stock sprouting poison weed and wormwood. When such a one hears the words of these sanctions, he may fancy himself immune, thinking, ‘I shall be safe, though I follow my own willful heart’ – to the utter ruin of moist and dry alike.” That is, worship God and only God and don’t even think of secretly worshiping other gods. Be true to God both outwardly and inwardly.

Attempting to lead a life of congruency where our actions are in alignment with our stated beliefs and guided by Jewish values will lead us to examine all areas of our behavior. I remember distinctly the description of a politician from some time ago because of its vividness. This politician was described as having naked double standards for how he would treat people: he was described as a kiss-up and kick-down type of person. We are taught that all human beings are created in God’s image and therefore all human beings are deserving of respect. This politician only gave respect to those who held power over him. Even if we are not as extreme a personality, we too must be careful to treat with respect those over whom we have power. Are you polite to your waiter when you go out to eat or to the salespeople when you go shopping? Please remember that how you treat people is how your children learn to treat people. If we tell our children to always say please and thank you, but act rudely to the wait staff, what’s the lesson that they’ll learn? If you spank your child yelling, “I told you not to hit your brother,” then the only lesson you teach is that hitting is reserved for those who are more powerful. Do as I say, not as I do, almost never works. We must be consistent in our behavior and exhibit the values we want our children to learn.

Judaism teaches us also to act consistently in our business dealings. In Talmud, tractate Bava Metzia, *perek HaZahav*, we are taught about the laws governing the sale of goods. I found it interesting in my study of this section that there were strict anti-fraud protections for the consumer in direct opposition to the maxim *caveat emptor*, let the buyer beware. I guess the first clue that *caveat emptor* isn’t a Jewish value is that it’s in

Latin, a language not known historically for its use by those who loved Jews or Jewish values. Be that as it may, the chapter continues to assert, surprisingly, that just as there is fraud against consumers, there is also fraud against sellers. Now, I absolutely loved *The Italian Job*. I mean, after I saw that movie, I almost went out and traded in my Corolla for a Mini Cooper. Absolutely, I wanted to own the DVD when it came out. So I went in to Best Buy and saw that I had two options. I could buy the remake for \$16.99 or I could buy the remake bundled with the original for \$14.99. Hmm?!? Clearly, there was a mistake in pricing, which I brought to their attention. Had I simply purchased the bundle without telling them, then that would have been fraud against the seller. It turned out well for me, by the way: I offered to pay \$24.99, the correct price, but they insisted that I pay the marked price and then immediately repriced all the remainder of their stock. To act Jewishly in our business dealings is to act consistently and equitably. I don't like being defrauded by mistakenly marked prices; neither should I defraud sellers when the mistake is in my favor.

Every other year, but especially every four years, we begin to hear quite loudly how religious values should guide our votes at election time. I have to say that I agree. Judaism demands that we take our religious values and apply them to the world around us. The lessons that we learn from Torah should inform our decisions about how we set up the society in which we live. I am not saying that we should set up or tolerate a theocracy. I, as a Progressive Jew, would dislike the theocracy of the Orthodox Rabbinate in the State of Israel as much as I would dislike a Christian theocracy here in the United States. However, when we hear the prophetic call to uphold the cause of the widow, the orphan and the stranger; when we hear the call to seek Justice and pursue it; when we hear the call to feed the hungry and clothe the naked; then we must heed these calls at the ballot box and vote our values. And make no mistake: not all religious values are the same. One sharp distinction relates to the abortion issue. In Christian theology, life begins at conception. In Jewish theology, life begins at birth. Clearly, these two radically different theological stances have dramatically different policy implications. And we, as Jews, should advocate for policies based on our Jewish values.

The one area in which we all seem, myself included, to advocate in one direction while acting in another is the balance in which Judaism asks us to live our lives. God gives us Shabbat, a day of no work whatsoever, to recreate ourselves, to restore ourselves, to keep us in balance. Shabbat is there to keep us personally in balance, to keep our relationships with each other, with the world and with God all in balance. Yet the wider culture seems to demand that we be constantly on, available and in touch with our cell phones and internet connections, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 52 weeks a year, for our entire lifespan until we die. Just as much as our work is bleeding into our free time, so too is our free time bleeding into our work. Tell the truth now, to yourselves, no hands need to be raised, how many of us have conducted our private business while at work, calling the doctor to make an appointment, shopping on the Internet, or reading that juicy blog? Our free time and our work time seem to be turning into one undifferentiated mass that is neither fully productive nor fully restorative. I am reminded of a Zen Buddhist saying: In walking, just walk. In sitting, just sit. Above all, don't wobble. Judaism calls us to differentiate our time between work and rest and not to mix the two, not to wobble.

Dr. Carol Ochs taught me that there are levels of truth. The first level is the truth of statements. That is, truth is reality corresponding to the statement that I make. I state that I am bald. Yes, that is a true statement. The second level is the truth of being. That is, do actions correspond to being? Once there was a frog that wanted to get back to the river before his skin dried out. But standing between him and the river was a scorpion. The scorpion said, "frog my friend, I'll let you get back to the water if you only carry me on your back across the river, for I wish to be on the other side." "I won't carry you across," the frog replied, "you'll sting me and I'll die." "Don't be silly," said the scorpion, "if I were to sting you, I would drown and also die." The frog, seeing that this was reasonable, let the scorpion onto his back and started across the river. Halfway across the scorpion stung him and the frog began to be paralyzed. "What have you done," the frog cried, "now we both shall perish." "I couldn't help myself," said the scorpion, "it's what I am." The third level of truth is Absolute Truth, the Truth upon which all reality is in fact based. This Truth is God.

We are all of us made in God's image. While we can never hope to attain the level of Absolute Truth, which belongs to God and God only, surely we can strive to be true to our Jewish selves, our Jewish being. We can strive to keep our words congruent with our actions. We can strive to act upon Jewish values in our personal lives, in our business lives, in our public lives, in our spiritual lives, in our lives as Jews. To act upon Jewish values is to be true to our being, drawing us closer to the image of God in which we were all created.

Shana Tova.