

# Towards a Wholehearted Judaism

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This past Shabbat, I spoke to our community about the mitzvah of rebuke, of *tochacha*. This evening I would like to share some very personal thoughts, feelings, and concerns that are close to my heart – as a Jew, as a husband and father, as a Modern Orthodox rabbi. You and I have been together for more than four years, and over these years our relationship has grown, deepened, and matured. The profound love and respect that I feel for our shul, for our communal family, compels me to share these personal struggles with you. Above all else, I share them with you because I believe that together we will be better suited to respond.

On Yom Kippur, we seek repentance through confession, and confession demands an honest appraisal and assessment of ourselves, our family, and our community.

Tonight as we set on this journey and process, I would like to focus on one particular challenge in the hope that our confession will lead and inspire repentance and return.

The Rav, Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, would often recall this memory: “When I learned in *cheider*, in yeshiva as a child, in the village of Chaslavitch, a day before the *Yomim Norayim*, the High Holidays, one could recognize in my teacher an unaccustomed feeling and joy. We students were very amazed at this, until our teacher said to us, “Do you know what tomorrow evening is? Tomorrow we begin the days of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, and among Chassidim the night is called '*Karanatzia Nacht*' ('Coronation Night'), when we place a crown on the head of God, so to speak. And do you know who places the crown? Yankel the Tailor and Berel the Shoemaker . . .”

Says Rav Soloveitchik: “Over the years I have said many sermons and written many discourses on the concepts of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, but nothing ever made me feel the theme of the holidays as the words of that teacher. Every year, when I pray: “Rule over the whole world in Your glory,” I remember them.”

The Rav’s powerful depiction deeply concerns me. I fear that our children, and perhaps even we, are no longer exposed to such pious religious personalities.

Simply put: Who crowns God for our children? Who reveals God's supreme glory to each of us through their devotion and commitment?

In the Book of Genesis, God seals a covenant with Abraham, one which is conditioned upon a single word:

<p>1. And Abram was ninety-nine years old, and God appeared to Abram, and He said to him, "I am the Almighty God; walk before Me and be <i>tamim</i> (I will translate this word shortly).</p> <p>2. And I will place My covenant between Me and between you, and I will multiply you very greatly."</p>	<p>א. וַיְהִי אֲבָרָם בֶּן תְּשַׁעִים שָׁנָה וַתֵּשַׁע שָׁנִים וַיֵּרָא יְהוָה אֶל אֲבָרָם וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו אֲנִי אֵל שְׂדֵי הַתְּהַלֵּךְ לְפָנַי וְהָיָה תָּמִים: ב. וְאֶתְנַה בְּרִיתִי בֵּינִי וּבֵינְךָ וְאֶרְבֶּה אוֹתְךָ בְּמֵאד מְאֹד:</p>
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God demands of Abraham to be *tamim*. Some of us might recognize the word *tam* from the Passover Haggadah, *tam* being the simple child.

However, the word *tamim* itself is not so simple.

Robert Alter as well the JPS Torah translate *tamim* as blameless, as in, "Walk with Me and be blameless." The usage is similar to a *Seh Tamim*, a sacrifice without a blemish. Just as the sacrifice will not bear a physical blemish, so too, you will not bear a spiritual or moral blemish.

Rav Aryeh Kaplan renders it as: "Walk before Me and be perfect." This translation likely echoes the different usage of the word *tam*, as complete and whole.

Finally, the Hertz Torah translates the verse as: "Walk before Me and be whole-hearted." This translation seems to capture both the moral resonance of the Alter and JPS translation as well as the notion of wholeness or completeness offered by the Rav Aryeh Kaplan edition.

It is this final translation that I am most interested in discussing with you tonight.

“To walk with God and to be whole-hearted” succinctly captures the meaning and essence of our covenant with God. It is a demanding and all-encompassing charge that at times may forcibly challenge and even conflict with some of our choices and way of living.

We lead busy and overwhelming lives, time is short, and our schedules are overburdened. In our honest and sincere desire to remain open to the modern world and the many blessings that it offers, and in our attempt to simply keep up with its ever-growing and changing demands, we often bear the risk of becoming exposed to a certain hesitancy, ambivalence, and complacency when it comes to some Jewish practices, observances, and choices, be it our level of *kashruth*, the length of time we devote to our own Torah study and prayer, the amount of money we are willing to invest in Jewish causes; schools, shuls, and *tzedakah*, or our very general pursuit of mitzvoth.

As the Talmud powerfully describes:

תלמוד בבלי מסכת ברכות דף לה עמוד ב

אפשר אדם חורש בשעת חרישה, וזורע בשעת זריעה, וקוצר בשעת קצירה, ודש בשעת דישה, וזורע בשעת הרוח, תורה מה תהא עליה?

If a person ploughs in the ploughing season, and sows in the sowing season, and reaps in the reaping season, and threshes in the threshing season, and winnows in the season of wind, what is to become of the Torah?

Sadly, we must ask ourselves this very question. Have we integrated God’s ways wholeheartedly into our lives?

To be sure, hesitancy, ambivalence, complacency, and religious lethargy are certainly not definitive of our generation alone.

The Talmud offers a powerful distinction between the early and later generations:

תלמוד בבלי מסכת ברכות דף לה עמוד ב

אמר רבה בר בר חנה אמר רבי יוחנן משום רבי יהודה ברבי אלעאי: בא וראה שלא כדורות הראשונים דורות האחרונים; דורות הראשונים היו מכניסין פירותיהן דרך טרקסמון - כדי לחייבן במעשר, דורות האחרונים מכניסין פירותיהן דרך גגות דרך חצרות דרך קרפיפות - כדי לפטרן מן המעשר; דאמר רבי ינאי: אין הטבל מתחייב במעשר עד שיראה פני הבית, שנאמר: דברים כ"ו + בערתי הקדש מן הבית

Rabbah bar Bar Chanah said in the name of R. Yochanan reporting R. Yehudah the son of Ilay: "Observe the difference between the earlier and the later generations. The earlier generations used to bring in their produce by way of the kitchen-garden purposely in order to make it liable to tithe, whereas the later generations bring in their produce by way of roofs or courtyards or enclosures in order to make it exempt from tithe. For R. Yannai has said: Untithed produce is not subject to tithing until it has come within sight of the house, since the Torah says, "I have put away the hallowed things out of my house."

Quite literally, the later generations looked for any and every single possible loophole, in order to diminish the performance of this mitzvah.

Unfortunately, at times, this ancient example echoes some of our own contemporary practices. Like the later generations in this midrash, we risk developing a religious culture that celebrates every Jewish legal loophole as an easy way out. At times, it seems like we too would rush to our rooftops and courtyards, we too would seek shelter in closures, just to avoid a mitzvah or modify it at the very least.

God's ways are becoming an inconvenience and we risk stumbling into the business of getting out of obligation than into the business of fulfilling our utmost obligations. We love leniencies and abhor stringencies, as though the service of God was meant to always be easy.

Now to be sure, I'm not only concerned about God. I'm more concerned about our children. And even more so, I'm concerned about us.

It is not God who notices all of our shortcuts and inconsistencies; it is the children who grow up in our midst, in our homes, in our communities, and in our schools, who notice it most.

You don't need to be God to realize when something is not done *betemimut* (wholeheartedly) or authentically, you just need to be a child.

Children know when our Judaism is just not that meaningful to us.

In the Torah God tells Abraham, "I am the Almighty God; walk before Me and be *tamim*, be wholehearted. And I will place My covenant between Me and between you, and I will multiply

you very greatly." The reward of *temimut* is the continued growth of the nation, of the Jewish people.

This is not magic or sorcery. Children are attracted to genuine behavior and the Torah here is teaching us that the Jewish people will continue to multiply not by birthrate alone, but by the ability of our children to continue to choose Jewish because we modeled choosing Jewish authentically.

And that's really at the very core of my concern – I am concerned about us.

Is Judaism sufficiently meaningful to us – meaningful to us in an ultimate sort of way? And if it is, why do we fail to live up to the ultimate meaning that it bestows? And if it is not, how will we make it so?

One of our shul members recently said to me: "Through the shul, Judaism became our family's organizing principle." That's powerful. I want that.

I want that for me, for my family, and for our community.

Make no mistake about it: The very viability and sustainability of Judaism demands that we reject timidity and complacency and fully embrace Judaism *be'temimut*, wholeheartedly, as an ultimate meaning-making way of life. *We* need it and the next generation *needs it as well*.

In a passionate rebuke of the people of Israel, the prophet Elijah powerfully captures this very struggle. The prophet questions and challenges the people: "*Ad matay atem poschim al shetey ha'seifim*" – "How long will you keep hopping between two opinions?"

The next verse is astounding: "*Ve'lo anu ha'am oto davar*" – "But the people answered him not a word."

At times we are just like the Israelites in that painful passage; we waver between different opinions, we are leading hesitant, at times complacent, and ambivalent Jewish lives, which may ultimately fail to convey a true, whole-hearted commitment to Judaism.

“How long will we waiver?” the prophet asks.

Let us not be dumbfounded by the question anymore. Tonight, we must begin the search for our response.