

## Mensch•Marks for the New Year

All of religion can be distilled down to the question of how to be a good person. To be religious is to be good – and to be good is to be religious. You can find a version of the Golden Rule [in almost every living faith](#); but for Jews, especially, being a *mensch* is at the core of an authentic Jewish life. In his groundbreaking new book, [“Putting God Second.”](#) Rabbi Donniel Hartman makes the case that ethical piety must always take precedence over ritual piety. Only kindness matters.

The Talmudic tractate Avot, 6:6 provides a roadmap as to how to live an ethical life. This passage includes 48 *middot* (measures) through which we can “acquire Torah.” [See the full list of middot here.](#) Each day during the High Holiday period, running from the first of Elul through Yom Kippur and beyond, I’ll be highlighting one of these *middot*, in order to assist each of us in the process of soul searching (“*heshbon ha-nefesh*”) and our preparations for the new year.

Leo Rosten defines *mensch* as “*someone to admire and emulate, someone of noble character. The key to being “a real mensch” is rectitude, dignity, a sense of what is right, responsible, decorous.*”

Each of these “**Mensch•Marks,**” as I call them, these benchmarks of *menschiness*, will be illuminated with bite-size essays, stories and anecdotes from various sources, including my own experiences. Any wisdom I share is not from a pulpit on high, but rather from an unfolding story of a fellow traveler, one who has stumbled, failed and persevered, struggling with the questions large and small, and through it all has tried to live with dignity and grace.

Warm wishes for a year of personal growth.

Rabbi Joshua Hammerman

## Mensch•Mark For Elul 1

### [A Listening Ear- Middah Sh'miat Haozen](#)

“*Sh'miat Haozen* is the “pay attention” middah or virtue. We learn by many senses and Copy of menschmarks elul 1 focus on acquiring Torah by listening. Regardless of whether one can physically hear or not, we are all capable of listening. One can hear things but still lack understanding. The act of attentive listening takes intention and work on the part of the listener.

Samson Raphael Hirsch taught that the 48 *middot* (attributes) are not gifts that are acquired together with Torah, but the means through which it is possible to acquire Torah. One who strives to learn Torah must acquire and employ these 48 attributes through diligent labor upon their own personality. He further taught that proper, accurate and

thorough listening is the first demand made on the learner. Such intentional and accurate listening precludes any carelessness, inattention or distraction by other things. (*Chapters of the Fathers*, translation and commentary by Samson Raphael Hirsch pp. 103-4)."

BARBARA BINDER KADDEN

### [Excerpt from "The Spirituality of Listening," by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks](#)

Time and again in the last month of his life Moses told the people, *Shema*: listen, heed, pay attention. Hear what I am saying. Hear what God is saying. Listen to what He wants from us. If you would only listen ... *Judaism is a religion of listening*. This is one of its most original contributions to civilization.

...Speaking and listening are not forms of detachment. They are forms of engagement. They create a relationship. The Hebrew word for knowledge, *da'at*, implies involvement, closeness, intimacy. "And Adam *knew* Eve his wife and she conceived and gave birth" (Gen. 4:1). That is knowing in the Hebrew sense, not the Greek. We can enter into a relationship with God, even though He is infinite and we are finite, because we are linked by words. In revelation, God speaks to us. In prayer, we speak to God. If you want to understand any relationship, between husband and wife, or parent and child, or employer and employee, pay close attention to how they speak and listen to one another. Ignore everything else.

Listening lies at the very heart of relationship. It means that we are open to the other, that we respect him or her, that their perceptions and feelings matter to us. We give them permission to be honest, even if this means making ourselves vulnerable in so doing. A good parent listens to their child. A good employer listens to his or her workers. A good company listens to its customers or clients. A good leader listens to those he or she leads. Listening does not mean agreeing but it does mean caring. Listening is the climate in which love and respect grow.

## **Mensch•Mark For Elul 2**

### [Loving All Creatures-Middah Ohev et HaBriyot](#)

#### **Commentary**

The rabbinic sage Hillel admired Aaron, the brother of Moses, as someone who had many good traits. Among those traits mentioned in our Text is loving one's fellow creatures (*Ohev et HaBriyot*).

In a commentary on *Pirkei Avot*, the rabbis use two familiar stories from the Bible to emphasize the importance of loving others.

"People must love their fellow creatures, and not hate them. The people of the generation which was dispersed over the earth (the tower of Babel generation, Genesis 11:1-9) loved one another, and so God did not destroy them, but only scattered them. But the people of Sodom hated one another, and so God destroyed them from this world and from the world to come." (*Avot de Rabbi Natan 12, 26b*)

In order to understand what it means to love all creatures, Rabbi Susan Freeman suggests that we turn to two respected sages, Maimonides and Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook. To Maimonides, it is how we behave toward others that shows our love for them. He explains that the commandment to "love your fellow person as yourself" is the basis for carrying out specific deeds of loving kindness such as visiting the sick, comforting mourners, and caring for the dead.

Rav Kook agrees with Maimonides and says that love for others is to be "expressed in practical action, by pursuing the welfare of those we are bidden to love, and to seek their advancement." (*Teaching Jewish Virtues*, p.179)

What about people who are different from us - people who are physically or mentally challenged; people who speak another language or whose skin is another color; people who may make us feel uncomfortable-are we supposed to love them too? Perhaps one of the reasons we have a virtue (*middah*) that instructs us to love all creatures (*Ohev et HaBriyot*) is that it's not something that we can do easily. Studying and thinking about the *middah* helps us to become more aware of its importance. (*Teaching Jewish Virtues* p.184)

Surely the *middah* (virtue) of *Ohev et HaBriyot* (loving all creatures) must embrace all the creatures God created, including animals, birds, and insects. A Hasidic source teaches that we must never speak derogatorily of any creature of God. Rabbi Susan Freeman suggests that we turn that comment into the positive, ie. speak positively of every creature of God, whether cow, wild animal, or bird. In fact, if you have ever had a pet, you know that you can feel love for an animal.

MARLENE MYERSON

### [Animal Cruelty and Jewish Law, from my Jewish Week series, Hammerman on Ethics](#)

*Q: This may sound weird, but I think my neighbor is cruel to his pet beagle. I know that if this was a person we were talking about, Jewish law would obligate me to go to the authorities. But this is a DOG. What's my obligation here?*

A. You need to pursue this. I say this not merely because I am life-long pet-o-phile, a vegetarian with two cuddly standard poodles. I say this also because it is the right thing to do. Jewish culture has long championed animal rights.

The Torah could not be more explicit when it instructs us (Exodus 23:5) to assist the animal of your enemy.

In that verse, the animal is a donkey that has been mistreated, presumably by its owner. Based on this law, the rabbis established the concept of "*tza'ar ba'ale hayyim*," calling on us to minimize the suffering of all living creatures, literally to "feel their pain" in a Bill Clinton sort of way.

Jews have a long history of opposing such activities as hunting for sport or cockfighting. The Talmud goes as far as to state that even the person who sits in the stadium to watch this kind of event spills blood. We should refrain from eating until we've fed our animals and we are not permitted to buy cattle beasts or birds unless we can adequately care for them.

Animals even get to observe Shabbat, during which we are prohibited from placing any burden at all on them. A full chapter of the Shulchan Aruch deals with this. A nice summary of the Jewish view on animal rights can be found [here](#).

The [ASPCA web site](#) details how to determine if abuse is really taking place and what you need to do about it. The Michael Vick case has sensitized us all to the need for vigilance against animal abuse, and the first line of defense is the neighbors. The [Humane Society of the United States](#) even has a dog fighting tip line - although it likely won't be relevant with a pet beagle. American Jews have had an animal rights scandal all our own, the inhumane conditions discovered at the now-bankrupt [Agriprocessors](#) plant.

Western society has come a long way in its sensitivity toward animals (in Elizabethan England, for instance, bloody dog fights were ubiquitous), but we've a long way to go.

So if your suspicions are well grounded, you've got to do something.

## **Mensch•Mark For Elul 3**

### **[A Minimum of Frivolity-Middah Miyut Sechok](#)**

Our text suggests that anyone who wants to be a scholar must not engage in too much laughter. It is puzzling that too much laughter is considered a negative virtue and is discouraged. Is it possible that the rabbis were merely concerned about students having too much fun and not spending enough time on their studies?

The great Talmudic teacher, Rabbi Akiva, best known for his wisdom and his diligence in studying Torah, suggested another reason for *miyut sechok*. He warned: "Raucous laughter and frivolity predispose a person to behavior that is not virtuous." (*Avot* 3:13)

Simeon Ben Jesus Ben Sira, a great sage and scribe who lived in the second century BCE, identified laughter as a sign of foolishness. In his book, *The Wisdom of Ben Sira*, he wrote: "A fool raises his voice in laughter, a wise man smiles in silence." (*Ben Sira* 21, 20)

In *Sefer Aggadah*, the following story is told to illustrate the concern for moderation in laughter and celebration, even at a joyous occasion. Mar, the son of Ravina, made a marriage feast for his son. When he saw that the sages were getting overly merry, he brought a precious cup worth four hundred *zuz* and smashed it before them, and they grew serious. (*The Book of Legends*, p.714)

Although we are warned that excessive laughter leads to behavior that is inappropriate, especially for someone who wants to be a scholar, we are also advised that too somber a mood is not conducive to study or growth in Torah either. The Talmud reports that Rabbah would commence his lectures with an amusing statement in order to put his disciples in a relaxed state of mind. (*Midrash Shmuel, Tiferes Yisrael*)

Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav (1772-1810) was another great Jewish figure who appreciated the significance of humor. Reb Nachman wrote, "There are men who suffer terrible distress and are unable to tell what they feel in their hearts, and they go their way and suffer and suffer. But if they meet one with a laughing face, he can revive them with his joy. And to revive someone is no slight thing." (*The Book of Jewish Values*, Telushkin)

MARLENE MYERSON

## **MY TAKE: Minimal Frivolity, Maximal Irony**

A decade ago, radio shock-joke Don Imus crossed the boundary where humor becomes offensive, in directing racial epithets at the Rutgers women's basketball team. I took the opportunity to [assemble a number of sources on the boundaries of humor](#), exploring the subject from a Jewish perspective.

When it comes to Purim, however, almost anything goes. (See my collection of [The Best Purim Parodies and Jewish Jokes](#)).

Who is the best Jewish comedian of all time? My vote goes to Kohelet, author of the biblical book of that name (a.k.a. [Ecclesiastes](#)), which is [read on the intermediate Shabbat of Sukkot](#). While little in the book would qualify as LOL funny (and the author himself equates [laughter with madness](#)), the use of [irony](#) and wordplay, the in-your-face skepticism and not-so-subtle subversiveness expose [the absurdity of life](#) and presage some of the best Jewish comics of the modern era.

[As I wrote in this Times of Israel article](#), among modern comics, you can find Kohelet in Mel Brooks, [Philip Roth](#) or even the lyrics of “Fiddler on the Roof,” (“Sunrise, Sunset,” chapter 1:5) but Ecclesiastes reads best alongside the works of Woody Allen. Many have discussed how the more serious films of the mature Allen reflect the absurdities of the book (“Crimes and Misdemeanors” and “Midnight in Paris” come to mind), but we can go back to the early Allen, his Catskills shtick, to find the most direct parallels.

Check out these pairs of quotes, taken from the biblical book and the Woodman.

On identity:

- A) *A good name is better than precious oil (Kohelet 7:1)*
- B) *My only regret in life is that I wasn't born someone else.*

On love:

- A) *Two are better than one (4:9)*
- B) *To love is to suffer. To avoid suffering one must not love. But then one suffers from not loving. Therefore to love is to suffer. Not to love is to suffer. To suffer is to suffer. To be happy is to love. To be happy, then, is to suffer. But suffering makes one unhappy. Therefore to be unhappy one must love, or love to suffer, or suffer from too much happiness (from “Love and Death”)*

On wealth:

- A) *A lover of money never has his fill of money. This too is futile (5:9)*
- B) *Money is better than poverty, if only for financial reasons.*

On work:

- A) *Sow your seed in the morning, and don't hold back your hand in the evening, since you don't know which is going to succeed. (11:8)*
- B) *Whosoever shall not fall by the sword or by famine, shall fall by pestilence so why bother shaving?*

On food:

A) *Cast your bread upon the waters: you shall find it after many days. (11:1)*

B) *Why does man kill? He kills for food. And not only food: frequently there must be a beverage.*

On the unchanging nature of life:

A) *All rivers run into the sea, but the sea is never full (1:7)*

B) *The lion and the calf shall lie down together but the calf won't get much sleep. [\(Without Feathers\)](#)*

On aging:

A) *Appreciate your vigor in the days of your youth (11:10)*

B) *Most of the time I don't have much fun. The rest of the time I don't have any fun at all.*

On the cycles of time:

A) *A season is set for everything; a time for every experience under heaven (3:1)*

B) *Why are our days numbered and not, say, lettered?*

On foolish speculation:

A) *The beginning of a fool's talk is foolishness, and the end of his talk is mischievous madness. (11:6)*

B) *What if everything is an illusion and nothing exists? In that case, I definitely overpaid for my carpet.*

On futility:

A) *All is futility! (1:2)*

B) *Not only is there no God, but try finding a plumber on Sunday.*

On death:

A) *It is better to go to a house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting, for death is the destiny of every man; the living should take this to heart (7:2)*

B) *I'm very proud of my gold pocket watch. My grandfather, on his deathbed, sold it to me.*

On sanity:

A) *Don't overdo goodness...but don't overdo wickedness and be a fool (7:17)*

B) *A man goes to a psychiatrist and says, 'Doc, my brother's crazy, he thinks he's a chicken.' The doctor says, 'Why don't you turn him in?' The guy says, 'We would. But we need the eggs.'*

On crime:

A) *When a crime is not punished quickly, people feel it is safe to do wrong (8:1)*

B) *He emerged from the hotel and walked up Eight Avenue. Two men were mugging an elderly lady. My God, thought Weinstein, time was when one person could handle that job.*

On God:

C) *Be not overeager to go to the house of God: more acceptable is obedience than the offerings of fools. (4:17)*

D) *If only God would give me some clear sign! Like making a large deposit in my name at a Swiss bank.*

On possessions and parenting:

A) *Naked he came out of his mother's womb and naked he will depart (5:14)*

B) *I don't think my parents liked me. They put a live teddy bear in my crib.*

On wisdom:

A) *For as wisdom grows, vexation grows; to increase learning is to increase heartbreak (1:18)*

B) *More than any time in history mankind faces a crossroads. One path leads to despair and utter hopelessness, the other to total extinction. Let us pray that we have the wisdom to choose correctly.*

On annoyances:

A) *Don't pay attention to everything that is said, so that you may not hear your slave reviling you (7:22)*

B) *What a world. It could be so wonderful if it wasn't for certain people.*

Kohelet would have loved this Woody Allen version of a Hasidic story:

*Rabbi Raditz of Poland was a very short rabbi with a long beard, who was said to have inspired many pogroms with his sense of humor. One of his disciples asked, "Who did God like better, Moses or Abraham?"*



*"Abraham," the Zaddik said.*

*"But Moses led the Israelites to the Promised Land," said the disciple.*

*"All right, so Moses," the Zaddik answered.*

After all, it was Kohelet who advised *"Be not overly righteous, and do not make yourself too wise,"* knowing that a little humility can go a long way, especially regarding what we know and what we think we know.

When it comes to Jews and our home-grown sense of absurdity, there is nothing new under the sun.

A minimum of frivolity, yes, but a maximum of irony.

## **Mensch•Mark For Elul 4**

### **Loving God-Middah Ohev et HaMakom**

You may recognize this from the *siddur* or prayer book. It begins the paragraph immediately following the Sh'ma, the prayer commonly known as the *V'ahavta*. This biblical text commands that we are to love God. Several questions immediately come to mind: Is it possible for one to be commanded to feel a specific emotion? And is this command to love made all the more difficult because we are being commanded to love that which is invisible, not a tangible thing that can be held?

Placing this verse into the context of the *siddur*, the ancient authors of our prayer book showed some extraordinary wisdom. In the morning service the prayer *Ahavah Rabbah* precedes the *Sh'ma*. It reads,

"Deep is your love for us, *Adonai* our God and great is Your compassion. Our Maker and Ruler, our ancestors trusted You, and You taught them the laws of life...."

In the evening service we read *Ahavat Olam*, before the *Sh'ma*. Its first line states,

"Unending is Your love for Your people, the House of Israel: Torah and Mitzvot, laws and precepts have You taught us."

In both prayers we are reminded first of God's deep love for the people of Israel. This declaration of God's love is then made tangible through the gift of Torah and mitzvot. We respond to *Ahavah Rabbah* and *Ahavat Olam* with the *Sh'ma*, declaring that *Adonai* is our God and *Adonai* is one. It is only then that we are commanded to "love God with all of your heart, all of your soul and with all of your might." The authors of the prayer book wanted to

remind the people of the reciprocal nature of the relationship between Israel and God. God loves us as demonstrated through the gift of Torah and mitzvot and we love God back by loving the Torah and showing that love by fulfilling the mitzvot.

Loving God is included in the 48 *middot* (ethical values) necessary for the acquisition of Torah. *Midrash Shmuel* teaches,

"One who loves the Ruler (i.e., God) occupies himself or herself with the Ruler's most valuable treasure. Diligent study of Torah is therefore an expression of a love for God. Through study, one learns to recognize the Godly path and express one's love of God by emulating God's ways." (*The Pirkei Avos Treasury*, ArtScroll p.419)

BARBARA BINDER KADDEN

## **MY TAKE: The God of Love**

We love God by loving our neighbor, since all were created in God's image. As I wrote at the time of the Supreme Court's ruling on LGBT Marriage, in a piece entitled "[The God of Love](#)," "It is truly astounding how quickly the landscape has changed. It often takes generations for social attitudes to evolve, and we've seen how stubbornly slow that process can be with racism in America and anti-Semitism everywhere else. But in America, for LGBTQ rights, the change has been stunning and dramatic."

In the article, I trace my own evolution on this topic to my relationship with my cousin Jeff Avick, who spoke here in 1993 about his coping with HIV. He said, "The God that I learned about in my home was a God of love, understanding, mercy and reason. That God has given me real strength...His love for us is not measured by the absence of hardships. His love for us is the life he's given us."

Six years later, when I last saw Jeff in hospice, curled up in a fetal position and barely breathing, I understood that no God of mine could have afflicted him so mercilessly. Rather, I sensed the sanctity in every heroic gasp of air, in each moment of survival. I reached back for every bit of kindness I could summon, and held his hand.

At his funeral, which took place in my synagogue's sanctuary, I read a poem Jeff had written decades earlier, when he was a teenager, called "Valentine to Man."

*"I listened to the music -  
And it sounded so sweet that I shouted  
up to heaven:  
"Let me love."*

*And God spoke to me and He said...  
"You do love.  
You feel the sun rise and exalt as it travels  
Its long journey over its old road.  
You see the great green wonder rolling in and out,  
taking life from its depths of turbulence to its shores of peace  
You hear the music of nature singing to you  
Ringing sweetly in your ears.  
You laugh and you cry, small yet large  
against the majesty of life.  
And while there is no one, nothing -  
You do love...  
And you breathe and sing along with the awkward,  
Beautiful melody...  
AND YOU KNOW ME,  
And you love."*

I've reflected on Jeff's words as the world has become more accepting of people in their infinite variety, and more embracing of all who don't fit so neatly into the categories that used to comprise what we called "community" but was in fact was leaving far too many behind.

Not only have I been freed from old, crusty preconceptions, my God has as well. My God is now, unequivocally, a God of love, not a God of exclusion, not a God who afflicts good, loving people with dreaded diseases to punish them for being so good and loving.

Some come out of the closet. I came off the fence.

Either one is a leap of faith, an act of great courage. It is also an act of return - a return to our true values, our deepest held beliefs, to who we were all along. ([Click here for the full article.](#))

## **Mensch•Mark For Elul 5**

### **[A Minimum of Pleasure-Middah Miyut Ta'anug](#)**

The *middah*, or ethical value, of *miyut ta'anug* teaches us to limit our pleasure. It seems that Judaism is of two minds when it comes to pleasure and enjoyment. There are numerous examples of taking pleasure from the world, treating oneself to luxury and enjoying beauty.

In the *midrash* we read the following statements: "Rav said to Rabbi Hamnuna: My child, if you have the means, treat yourself well;" "Three things restore a person's spirit: beautiful sounds, sights, and scents;" and "Sages said in the name of Rav: A person will have to give reckoning and account for everything that his or her eye saw and that he or she did not eat." (*Sefer Ha-Aggadah*, 585:95, 586:102, and 586:100).

In contrast, *Midrash Shmuel* teaches that even wealthy people should not seek pleasure for its own sake; to do so is spiritually detrimental. ( *Pirkei Avot*, ArtScroll p. 415)

In the Text above, a direct comparison is made between a table of luxurious food and a table of learning. Clearly the table of learning is of more value than the table of special foods.

Reuven Bulka wrote, "one should not eliminate pleasure altogether, but one should moderate pleasure in order to properly appreciate Torah in its spiritual dimension." (*As A Tree By The Waters*, p.255)

The best advice may come from Rabbi Joseph Telushkin who wrote, "As long as you act morally and generously, you have a right to enjoy life's delights." (*The Book of Jewish Values*, p. 96)

BARBARA BINDER KADDEN

## **MY TAKE: The End of Jewish Guilt?**

We have entered [the post-guilt phase of American Jewish history](#). The recent Pew survey showed that an astonishingly high percentage of American Jews are proud to be Jewish, even if they've strayed far from the fold. But a guilt free Jewishness should not imply that we should partake of all guilty pleasures to the point of gluttony.

Maimonides, a doctor as well as a sage, was a fierce advocate of moderation in everything that is consumed. [Check out his chapter on health and see for yourself.](#)

Did you know, for instance, that

*...One should not eat until one's stomach is [very] full, but one should [only] eat until one's stomach is three-quarters full. Nor should one drink water during a meal, except a little mixed with wine, but once the food begins to digest one should what one needs to drink, but one should never drink too much, even when the food digests. One should nor eat unless one has checked oneself to make sure that one does not need to relieve oneself. One should not eat unless one has first relieved oneself, or until one's body gets warm, or unless one has worked at something else first. The general rule of the matter is that one should always answer one's body. In the morning, one should work until one's body gets warm, then one should wait until*

*one's soul has settled, and then one may eat. It is good to wash in hot water after having worked, then wait a while, and then eat.*

Who needs "Doctor Mom" when we can get the straight dope from "Dr. Rambam."

## **Mensch•Mark For Elul 6**

### **Loving Reproof or Rebuke-Middah Ohev et HaTochachot**

This *middah* (the Jewish ethical value) adds loving reproof to the list of traits one needs to acquire Torah. Why would anyone love or value being admonished?

In the commentary Mili d'Avos it is explained:

"A mature person welcomes constructive criticism; he or she puts spiritual growth ahead of ego. One must always understand that whoever offers rebuke is merely a messenger of God sent to make us focus on our shortcomings. Thus, do not reject the criticism of humans for if you do so, you really detest the rebuke of God." (*Pirkei Avos*, ArtScroll p.420)

The key to this explanation is that one should welcome constructive criticism.

This *middah* is not suggesting that one simply accept whatever is said of a critical nature. It is corrective rebukes concerning religious or moral shortcomings that are to be accepted and welcomed.

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch taught that a true disciple of Torah study loves right, duty, and fairness and will defend them wherever he or she may go. Since the goal of Torah study is the disciple's own personal moral and ethical perfection and improvement—the disciple will not be angry with someone who points out the disciple's errors or faults. In fact, the disciple should thank this individual, regarding him or her as a friend and not an enemy. (*Chapters of the Fathers*, translation and commentary by Samson Raphael Hirsch, p.108-109)

Even the rabbis of the Talmud recognized how difficult it is to accept rebuke when one wrote, "I doubt whether in this age there is a single person who accepts rebuke." (Talmud, Arakhin)

That statement was made centuries ago, yet remains true today. It is easy to give criticism but very difficult to accept it.

BARBARA BINDER KADDEN

Here are some tips on [how to take criticism like a champ](#).

### **1. Stop Your First Reaction**

At the first sign of criticism, before you do anything—stop. Really. Try not to react at all! You will have at least one second to stop your reaction. While one second seems insignificant in real life, it's ample time for your brain to process a situation. And in that moment, you can halt a dismissive facial expression or reactive quip and remind yourself to stay calm.

### **2. Remember the Benefit of Getting Feedback**

Now, you have a few seconds to quickly remind yourself of the benefits of receiving constructive criticism—namely, to improve your skills, work product, and relationships, and to help you meet the expectations that your manager and others have of you.

You should also try to curtail any reaction you're having to the person who is delivering the feedback. It can be challenging to [receive criticism from a co-worker](#), a peer, or someone that you don't fully respect, but remember, accurate and constructive feedback comes even from flawed sources.

### **3. Listen for Understanding**

You've avoided your typical reaction, your brain is working, and you've recalled all the benefits of feedback—high-five! Now, you're ready to engage in a productive dialogue as your competent, thoughtful self (as opposed to your combative, *Mean Girls* self).

As the person shares feedback with you, listen closely. Allow the person to share his or her complete thoughts, without interruption. When he or she is done, repeat back what you heard. For example, "I hear you saying that you want me to provide more detailed weekly reports, is that right?" At this point, avoid analyzing or questioning the person's assessment; instead, just focus on understanding his or her comments and perspective. And give the benefit of the doubt here—hey, [it's difficult to give feedback to another person](#). Recognize that the person giving you feedback may be nervous or may not express his or her ideas perfectly.

### **4. Say Thank You**

Next (and this is a hard part, I know), look the person in the eyes and thank him or her for sharing feedback with you. Don't gloss over this—be deliberate, and say, "I really appreciate you taking the time to talk about this with me." Expressing appreciation doesn't

have to mean you're agreeing with the assessment, but it does show that you're acknowledging the effort your colleague took to evaluate you and share his or her thoughts.

## **5. Ask Questions to Deconstruct the Feedback**

Now it's time to process the feedback—you'll probably want to get more clarity at this point and share your perspective. Avoid engaging in a debate; instead, ask questions to get to the root of the actual issues being raised and possible solutions for addressing them. For example, if a colleague tells you that you got a little heated in a meeting, here are a few ways to deconstruct the feedback:

Seek specific examples to help you understand the issue: "I was a little frustrated, but can you share when in the meeting you thought I got heated?"

Acknowledge the feedback that is not in dispute: "You're right that I did cut him off while he was talking, and I later apologized for that."

Try to understand whether this is an isolated issue (e.g., a mistake you made once): "Have you noticed me getting heated in other meetings?"

Seek specific solutions to address the feedback: "I'd love to hear your ideas on how I might handle this differently in the future."

## **6. Request Time to Follow Up**

Hopefully, by this point in the conversation, you can agree on the issues that were raised. Once you articulate what you will do going forward, and thank the person again for the feedback, you can close the conversation and move on.

That said, if it's a larger issue, or something presented by your boss, you may want to ask for a follow-up meeting to ask more questions and get agreement on next steps. And that's OK—it'll give you time to process the feedback, seek advice from others, and think about solutions.

Constructive criticism is often the only way we learn about our weaknesses—without it we can't improve. When we're defensive, instead of accepting and gracious, we run the risk of missing out on this important insight. Remember, feedback is not easy to give and it's certainly not easy to receive, but it will help us now and in the long run.

See also [this article](#), lending a Jewish perspective.

## Mensch•Mark For Elul 7

### [A Minimum of Sleep-Middah Miyut Shaynah](#)

This text comes from chapter six in the book of Proverbs. The chapter warns the reader against becoming a lazybones and ending up impoverished. The biblical author cites the ant as a model of industry, one who prepares its food stores during the summer months of harvest, even though the ant has no leader or ruler telling her to do so. In contrast, the lazybones stays in bed and does not seek employment or provisions. The lazybones appears to be sleeping his/her life away. The commentator Ralbag (Rabbi Levi ben Gershon) explained that with a minimum amount of sleep and relaxation one's periods of poverty and want will soon pass.

As a Jewish ethical value - *middah*, the concept of *miyut shanah* encourages an individual to maintain a minimum amount of sleep in order to be wakeful for the study of Torah. As Rabbi Reuven Bulka has written, "An individual who is excited about Torah opportunities will want to stretch the day. One way of doing it is by sleeping less." (*As A Tree By the Waters*, p.255)

A caution is included in the comment by Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, "In order to gain time for studies, one who is desirous of acquiring Torah wisdom must limit the hours of sleep to the minimum that is necessary for the preservation of health."

The story of a lazybones' attitude to study is found in the *Midrash*. "When a lazybones is told, 'Your teacher is in the city nearby; go and learn Torah from your teacher,' the lazybones replies, 'But I fear there will be a lion on the road.' When the lazybones is told, 'Your teacher is in your township, get up and go to your teacher,' the lazybones replies, 'I fear that the lion may be in the streets.' When the lazybones is told, 'Behold, your teacher is at home,' the lazybones replies, 'If I go to my teacher's home, I am certain to find the door bolted.' Then the lazybones is told, 'But the door is open.' At that point, when the lazybones is at a loss to reply, the lazybones says, 'Whether the door is open or bolted, I want to sleep a bit more.'" (*The Book of Legends Sefer Ha-Aggadah*, Bialik and Ravnitzky 429:267)

BARBARA BINDER KADDEN

### **MY TAKE: Borrowed Time or Jewish Time?**

If you are interested in what Jewish law has to say about sleep, [you can check the "Halachapedia"](#) to find the whens, wheres, how much, what to wear, what sleeping positions and who else can be in the room.



I see this mensch\*mark not as a call for sleep deprivation but a recognition that every waking moment needs to be used wisely. It's a call against laziness and needless delay.

Procrastination actually has deep Jewish roots. There was Moses, who lingered on the mountain for forty days, and Esther, who delayed and fasted three days before meeting with the king. El Al used to stand for "Every landing always late." There is little that we know about the Messiah, except that S/he tarries.

So what is at the root of procrastination? We call it Jewish Time.

According to the Urban Dictionary, Jewish Time means, *"Not perfectly on time; possibly somewhat late, but no harm is done as a result. The implication is that there is no need to be exactly on time, and starting a little late is acceptable. The term comes from Jewish culture, which is often relaxed about punctuality."*

Leo Baeck, the early 20<sup>th</sup> century German rabbi, always arrived on time to his lodge meetings, but often at the beginning it was just him and the treasurer. One day he decided to bring to a vote at the very beginning of the meeting a proposal to provide lots of money for the publication of a new Bible translation by Martin Buber. Only two of them there, and they voted to approve, and none of the others were ever late again.

You know what's even later than Jewish time? Rabbi time. But I try to arrive on time for things when I can. I don't want to be referred to as "the late Rabbi Hammerman."

But despite a history rich in procrastination, Judaism also understands that a minute wasted is a minute that is gone forever. The Torah reminds us that, "the wages of a laborer shall not remain with you until morning." When we waste time or delay, it doesn't just affect us, it affects everybody else too.

As Hillel said, "If not now, when."

## **Mensch•Mark For Elul 8**

### **[Loving Righteous Ways-Middah Ohev Et HaTzadakat](#)**

In Deuteronomy we read: "Do that which is right and good in the sight of God" (Deuteronomy 6:18). Rabbi Mark Washofsky explains that this requires us to act as a holy people in every aspect of our daily lives, in our contact with all our fellow human beings, in

our social and economic pursuits and in our ritual activities. (*Jewish Living: A Guide to Contemporary Reform Practice* p.297)

This teaching is echoed in text that comes from the book of Isaiah. Judaism is a faith rooted in righteous good deeds. One cannot simply be a repository for Torah knowledge. The essence and purpose of study is action. Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah used to say:

One whose wisdom exceeds his or her good deeds what is that person like? To a tree whose branches are many, but whose roots are few; and the wind comes and uproots it and turns it upside down. But the one whose good deeds exceed his or her wisdom, what is that person like? To a tree whose branches are few, but whose roots are many, even if all the winds in the world were to come and blow against it, they could not budge it from its place. (*Pirkei Avot* 3:22)

Rabbi Elisha ben Abuyah created another metaphor for those with knowledge and varying amounts of good deeds. He said that a person who has learned much Torah and has good deeds is like a horse which has reins. The person who has the first—much Torah, but not the second—good deeds, is like a horse without reins: it soon throws the rider over its head. (*Avot de Rabbi Natan* xxiv, 39a as found in *The Rabbinic Anthology* # 469)

In Jewish tradition, studying and doing go hand in hand. In the midrashic commentary *Tanna Debe Eliyahu*, we learn that an individual should first be a decent human being (in other words a mensch—Yiddish for a good decent individual) before seeking to acquire learning:

"Let a person do good deeds, then ask *Adonai* for knowledge of Torah: let a person first act as righteous and upright individuals act, and then let that person ask *Adonai* for wisdom: let a person first grasp the way of humility, and then ask *Adonai* for understanding."

BARBARA BINDER KADDEN

## **MY TAKE: Deed and Creed**

It's often claimed that Jews are overwhelmingly secular, and if they bother to think about God at all, a large percentage are agnostic. But that doesn't mean that these Jews are not "religious." In fact, when we evaluate their religiosity on purely Jewish terms, rather than buying into the prevailing Christian notions of faith found here in the West, Jews come off as being astoundingly "religious" after all.

A [2012 Pew survey of Jews and Jewish Values](#) illustrates my point perfectly. At least 8-in-10 American Jews say that pursuing justice (84%) and caring for the widow and the orphan (80%) are somewhat or very important values that inform their political beliefs and activity.

- More than 7-in-10 also say that *tikkun olam*, healing the world (72%), and welcoming the stranger (72%) are somewhat or very important values.
- A majority (55%) say that seeing every person as made in the image of God is somewhat or very important in informing their political beliefs and activity.

In Judaism, doing is far more important than believing, or even learning – unless the learning LEADS to the doing, and doing primarily equates to ways in which we care for our neighbor.

Further, as I [wrote in a column about the casting of an agnostic Jew in the role of Tevye](#), “Agnosticism for a Jew is part of that ongoing dialogue with divinity that is Tevye's specialty. It is in fact the ultimate expression of spirituality, the religious quest as extreme sport.”

The essence of Jewish belief is questioning; its spirituality is fueled by skepticism. The very term "Israel" means to struggle with God. The first Hebrew passage a Jewish child learns is the "Four Questions" recited at the Passover seder. Those who claim to be agnostic are actually more true to classic Judaic forms of religiosity than those who profess blind faith. Christians are nurtured on dogma; Jews are nurtured on doubt, which is a prime reason for Judaism's increasing popularity among other Americans in a time of uncertainty.

In essence, the only truly Jewish way to show love for God is not to believe, but rather to express the loving in the doing, in the living of a just and righteous life.

## **Mensch•Mark For Elul 9**

### **[A Minimum of Small Talk-Middah Miyut Sichah](#)**

Many of the *middot* are concerned with striving for moderation in our lives. This *middah* is particularly focused on minimizing conversation. Our text suggests that too much talking can lead to transgressions while minimizing talking is considered a sign of intelligence.

The sages of the Talmud connect silence with wisdom. R. Hiyya says "It isn't necessary to tell a wise man to hold his tongue" (*Derech Eretz Zuta* 7.4) while R. Akiva says: "Silence is a protection for wisdom." (*Pirkei Avot* 3:17) According to the Biblical commentator Bartenura, R. Akiva "is not talking about silence with respect to speaking of Torah because it has been written that one should speak words of Torah. And the silence being referred to is not about gossip, *lashon hara* (evil speech), or slander because the Torah contains laws about those transgressions. What this line about silence must be referring to is elective, permitted conversation that takes place between two people. A person should minimize that kind of talk as much as possible." Solomon in Proverbs said about these matters: "Even fools, if they keep silent, are deemed wise." (Freeman, *Teaching Jewish Virtues*, p.152)

However, the sages were not urging us to take vows of total silence. They understood that "there is a time to keep silent and a time to speak" (Eccl.3:7) and that both silence and speech are important in expressing the many aspects of wisdom.

The Talmudic rabbis have provided us with very clear guidelines regarding the importance of limiting what we say:

"The wise man does not speak before him that is greater than he in wisdom;  
He does not break into his fellow's speech.  
He is not in a rush to reply.  
He asks what is relevant and replies to the point.  
He speaks of first things first and of last things last.  
Of what he has not heard he says, "I have not heard,"  
And he acknowledges what is true.  
And the opposites apply to the clod." (*Pirkei Avot* 5:9)

## **MY TAKE: Words Matter**

Unfortunately, the Talmudic rabbis often associated idle chatter with women, but let's set that aside as we look more deeply into the importance of choosing words carefully. Words are vehicles of holiness, and not just for Jews. Check out these two [Buddhist quotes](#).

*"Speak only the speech that neither torments self nor does harm to others. That speech is truly well spoken. Speak only endearing speech, speech that is welcomed. Speech when it brings no evil to others is pleasant."*

*"He avoids idle chatter and abstains from it. He speaks at the right time, in accordance with facts, speaks what is useful, speaks of the Dhamma and the discipline; his speech is like a treasure, uttered at the right moment, accompanied by reason, moderate and full of sense."*

The 19<sup>th</sup> century rabbinic sage known as the Chafetz Chayim (seeker of life) made the laws of holy speech his life's work. You can read [the laws involving speech and gossip here](#), a [primer on how to raise our children to speak well of others](#), and [a full translation of the Chafetz Chayim's Guide to the Laws of Gossip on this website](#), arranged for daily study.

Elie Wiesel, of blessed memory, [spoke often about the profound significance of silence](#), as well as the need to speak up at the appropriate times in the face of evil. He said:

*"You can be a silent witness, which means silence itself can become a way of communication. There is so much in silence. There is an archeology of silence. There is a geography of silence. There is a theology of silence. There is a history of silence. Silence is universal and you can work within it, within its own parameters and its own context, and make that silence into a testimony. Job was silent after he lost his children and everything, his fortune and his health. Job, for seven days and seven nights he was silent, and his three friends who came to visit him were also silent. That must have been a powerful silence, a brilliant silence."*

All that said, I do believe there is a time for small talk too. It's the glue that binds people together in common discovery. It's the unpeeling of the first layer into a person's soul. You can't possibly get to know someone deeply without first exploring the superficialities that are common ground, safe Copy of menschmarks elul 9subjects like the weather and the latest movies.

This mensch\*mark doesn't say "NO small talk," after all. We just need to be aware that at some point, we need to recall that time's a wastin' and there is important work to do.

## **Mensch•Mark For Elul 10**

### **Moderation in Business-Middah Miyut Sechorah**

This text, taken from the Talmud, illustrates the importance that Judaism places on moderation in virtually all aspects of our lives.

The rabbis of the Talmud often expressed their concerns that people would get so involved in conducting their businesses that they would neglect the study of Torah. R. Meir cautioned,

"Give little time to business, and occupy yourself assiduously with Torah. Be lowly in spirit before all men. If you have once been remiss in study of Torah, soon you will find many other occasions to be remiss in studying. But if you have toiled (assiduously) at the study of Torah, God has abundant reward to give you." (*Avot* 4:9-10)

While they deemed very little to be more valuable than study, the rabbis knew that a certain amount of work was necessary in order to make learning possible.

"Rava said to the rabbis: Don't come to me to study during the month of Nisan [harvest time] or the month of Tishrei [when grapes and olives are ready for pressing]. Do your work then so you won't be threatened by poverty." (*Jewish Moral Virtues*, p.82)

In fact, what they counseled was moderation—a middle course. R. Judah illustrated this advice by the following parable:

"There is a highway that runs between two paths, one of fire and the other of snow. If a person walks too close to the fire, this person will be scorched by the flames; if too close to the snow, this person will be bitten by the cold. What is the person to do? This person is to walk in the middle, taking care not to be scorched by the heat nor bitten by the cold." (*Avot de Rabbi Natan* 28)

In allocating our energy, we are continually making decisions about the relative importance of each choice that we make. While making money is a highly regarded Jewish goal, it is only one of many. Taking the time to study and to learn about the paths that the Torah can lead us to can help us reach other worthy goals.

MARLENE MYERSON

## [Eight Basic Principles of Jewish Business Ethics](#)

One way to combine business and Torah is to do business according to the values of Torah. Here is an abridged version of [eight basic principles of Jewish business ethics](#), as laid out by Rabbi David Golinkin:

1. First we shall deal with **the laws of accurate weights and measures**. We are admonished in the book of Vayikra (19:35-36): "You shall not falsify measures of length, weight, or capacity. You shall have an honest balance, an honest weight, an honest ephah, and an honest hin".

The Mishnah rules (Bava Batra 5:10 = 88a) that

The wholesaler must clean out his measures once every thirty days and the householder once every twelve months... The retailer cleans his measures twice a week and polishes his weights once a week; and cleans out his scale before every weighing.

Throughout the Talmudic period, the rabbis appointed agronomoi - a Greek word for market commissioners - whose job it was to inspect measures and weights and to fix prices for basic commodities (Bava Batra 89a). The agronomoi eventually disappeared, but the ideal was still there as late as the nineteenth century when Rabbi Israel Salanter wrote: "As the rabbi must inspect periodically the slaughtering knives of the shoctim in town to see that they have no defect, so must he go from store to store to inspect the weights and measures of the storekeepers" (Dov Katz, Tenuat Hamussar, Vol. 1, Jerusalem, 1996, p. 281).

Today, these laws are just as applicable as they were in biblical times. Wholesalers and retailers must check their scales and cash registers on a regular basis, not just because civil law demands it, but also because Jewish law requires it.

2. The second category of Jewish business law is called ona'at **mamon or monetary deception**. It is based on a verse in the book of Vayikra (25:14): "When you sell anything to your neighbor or buy anything from your neighbor, you shall not deceive one another".

This verse clearly refers to monetary deception. The rabbis of the Talmud used it as a basis for a series of specific laws on the subject (Bava Metzia 49b and 50b; Rambam, Mekhira, Chapter 12). They ruled that if the price charged was more than one sixth above the accepted price, the sale is null and void and the seller must return the buyer's money. If it was exactly one sixth more, the transaction is valid, but the seller must return the amount overcharged. If it was less than a sixth, the transaction is valid and no money need be returned. Needless to say, these laws are still very relevant today. It is permissible for a Jew to make a fair profit; it is not permissible to price gouge and rob the customer blind. Such behavior is ona'at mamon or monetary deception.

3. The third category we shall discuss is related to the second. It is called **ona'at devarim or verbal deception**. It is based on another verse in the same chapter of Vayikra (25:17): "Do not deceive one another, but fear your God, for I the Lord am your God." Since the other verse had explicitly mentioned monetary deception, the rabbis concluded that this verse refers to verbal deception. And thus we learn in the Mishnah (Bava Metzia 4:10 = 58b and parallels): "Just as there is deception in buying and selling, there is deception in words. A person should not say to a merchant: 'How much does this cost?' if he has no intention of buying it".

But why not? What's wrong with comparison shopping? Nothing! But in this case he is not asking in order to compare prices. He is asking out of idle curiosity, which gives the merchant false hopes. Therefore the mishnah says "he has no intention of buying it" and a parallel beraita (Bava Metzia 58b) states that he doesn't even have any money.

As for our own day, once again the law of ona'at devarim is very applicable. Let us say that Reuven goes into a warehouse outlet in order to buy a computer, but he wants a demonstration before he spends \$1000. The warehouse outlet is not equipped for demonstrations. The salesman says to Reuven: "go to the IBM showroom down the block and ask for a demonstration, then come back here and buy the computer at our low low price". Reuven complies and gets a free demonstration plus a discount.

In this case, Reuven has committed ona'at devarim - verbal deception. When Reuven asks for the demonstration at the IBM store, he has absolutely no intention of purchasing the computer there. He merely wants a free demonstration. The IBM salesman is being deceived. He either loses a real customer while waiting on Reuven, or feels badly when Reuven walks out on him after a half-hour demonstration. This is ona'at devarim (cf. Tucker pp. 261-262 and Levine, Economics and Jewish Law, pp. 8-9).

4. The fourth category of Jewish business law is called **gneivat da'at, which literally means "stealing a person's mind"**. We would call it false packaging or false labeling. Interestingly enough, it is not based on a specific verse from the Bible, but was derived by the Sages from the laws of theft and the laws of honesty. We learn in the Mekhilta (D'nezikin, Chap. 13, ed. Lauterbach, Vol. 3, p. 105): "There are seven kinds of thieves: the first is he who steals the mind of his neighbor."

The Talmud gives a number of specific examples of such false packaging or false labeling.

Our Sages have taught: one should not sell a sandal made from the leather of an animal that died of disease as if it was made from the leather of an animal that was slaughtered, because he is misleading the customer" (Hullin 94a).

One should not sift the beans at the top of the bushel because he is "deceiving the eye" by making the customer think that the entire bushel has been sifted. It is forbidden to paint animals or utensils

in order to improve their appearance or cover up their defects (Bava Metzia 60a-b).

We are all familiar with these kinds of false packaging. A wholesaler takes an inferior brand of shirt and puts on Pierre Cardin labels. You buy a box of perfect-looking tomatoes or strawberries, only to discover upon opening the box at home that they were packaged with the bad spots facing down. And we all know how used cars are touched up and polished for the sole purpose of overcharging the customer. These are all good examples of gneivat da'at, clearly forbidden by Jewish law.<sup>5</sup> The next category we shall discuss is called "putting a stumbling block before the blind". We would call it giving someone a bum steer. This law is based on Vayikra Chapter 19 (v. 14): "You shall not curse the deaf nor put a stumbling block before the blind, but you shall fear your God, I am the Lord". Our Sages interpreted this verse in a very broad fashion (Sifra ad. Loc.):

"You shall not put a stumbling block before the blind" - before someone who is blind in that particular matter. don't say to your neighbor 'sell your field and buy a donkey', when your whole purpose is to deceive him and buy his field. And if you claim 'But I gave him good advice!' [Remember,] this is something which is hidden in the heart, [and therefore] the end of the verse says: "but you shall fear your God, I am the Lord".

Once again, the law of the stumbling block can be readily applied to modern situations: a real estate agent should not dupe a young couple into buying a home with structural faults simply in order to make a fast buck. A stockbroker should not sell his client a bad investment just to collect the commission. A salesman should not convince his customer to buy an expensive item he really has no use for. These are all considered "a stumbling block before the blind" about which we are warned "and you shall fear your God, I am the Lord."

5. Considering the scope of Jewish business law, it is not surprising that it also has a clear opinion regarding **tax evasion**. 1800 years ago the Amora Shmuel established the legal principle that in civil matters dina d'malkhuta dina - "the law of the land is the law" (Bava Kama 113a and parallels). In its discussion of this principle, the Talmud specifically includes taxation as a secular law that must be followed. This, for example, is the way Maimonides summarizes this law (Gezeilah 5:11 and cf. Hoshen Mishpat 369:6):

but a tax fixed by the king of 33% or 25% or any fixed sum. a person who avoids paying such a tax is a transgressor because he is stealing the king's portion, regardless of whether the king is Jewish or not.

So we see, Jewish law requires us to pay our taxes in a scrupulous fashion because in civil matters "the law of the land is the law".

6. In addition to all the laws we have mentioned, the halakhah contains a number of ethical principles which go one step beyond what we would normally expect a businessman to do.



Here are two examples among many:

A. The first principle is called "**lifnim mishurat hadin**", which means "beyond the letter of the law". Here is one classic case. According to Jewish law, a purchase has not been concluded until the buyer has physically "lifted up" the item being bought (Bava Metzia 4:2 = 44a). In light of this fact, the following story is quite surprising:

It happened that Rav Safra had some wine for sale, and a potential buyer came to him while he was reciting the Shema. The customer said "Sell me this wine for such and such a price". Rav Safra did not answer [so as not to interrupt the Shema]. Assuming that he was unwilling to settle for the price offered, the customer added to his original offer, and said, "Sell me this wine for such and such a price". Rav Safra still did not answer. [Presumably, this cycle was repeated, with ever-escalating prices.] Upon finishing the Shema, Rav Safra said to him: "From the time you made your first offer, I had resolved in my mind to sell it to you. Therefore I may take no greater amount [than your first bid]". (Sheiltot Vayehi, No. 38, ed. Mirsky, Vol. 2, p. 252 and parallels).

The Sheiltot, an early code of Jewish law, went so far as to make Rav Safra's behavior a halakhic norm for all Jews. It rules:

There is no question if he said 'I will sell you this', but even if he merely resolved in his mind to sell something [at a particular price], even if he did not articulate it, he should not go back on that resolution.

This decision was not included in later codes of Jewish law, yet the concept of "lifnim mishurat hadin" remained an ideal, which Jews strive to emulate until today.

Indeed, Rav Safra's behavior was repeated by a German Jew some 1600 years later.

The firm of Beer, Sondheimer and Company is reported to have owed its tremendous expansion to the following fact. On a Friday in 1870, just before the Franco-German War broke out, Mr. Beer left his office for the Sabbath rest. He had large holdings in copper and other metals necessary for the waging of war. The porter received a number of telegrams, which he presented on Sunday morning to his employer. They came from the War Ministry and offered to buy all metals in the possession of Mr. Beer; each successive wire increased the price. When Mr. Beer, on Sunday, went through these messages, he informed the War Department that he would have accepted the first offer and that he had failed to answer it because it was the Sabbath. He was, therefore, prepared to let the government have all his merchandise at the rate originally suggested to him. The War Ministry was so impressed by this example of living Judaism that they made the firm its main supplier and thus established its global significance. (Jung in Kellner, p. 341).

B. The second ethical principle is taken from the biblical verse (Bemidbar 32:22): "*V'heyitem*

*nekiyim meishem umeyisrael*" - "And you shall be guiltless before the Lord and before Israel". This principle dictates that **those in a position of trust must be above suspicion**. Thus, in Talmudic times, charity collectors were not permitted to exchange copper coins which they had collected, for their own silver coins, because this might give the impression of impropriety. Therefore, they were only allowed to exchange the coins with outsiders (Bava Batra 8b and parallels). Similarly, when surplus food accumulated in the soup kitchen, the overseers could not buy the food themselves but had to sell it to others (ibid.).

This principle of "above suspicion" finds easy application in the modern business setting. A manager or a treasurer of a company can frequently secure reimbursement of business expenses without submitting receipts. The principle of "v'heyitem nekiyim", however, requires him to submit the appropriate documentation in order to avoid suspicion of embezzlement (Levine, Economics and Jewish Law, pp. 16-17).

7. The last two principles I shall mention are especially relevant to Jews living in a non-Jewish society. They apply not only to business ethics but to all of our relations with our non-Jewish neighbors. They are called **Kiddush Hashem, or the sanctification of God's name**, and **Hillul Hashem or the desecration of God's name**. They stem from a verse in Vayikra (22:32): "You shall not desecrate My holy name, that I may be sanctified in the midst of the people of Israel - I am the Lord who sanctifies you". This verse means that any good or holy act that a Jew does, sanctifies God's name in the eyes of his Jewish and gentile neighbors, while any bad or profane act that a Jew does, desecrates God's name in the eyes of the public. When a Jew cheats on his taxes, the tax official does not say "Max Goldberg is a cheat", but rather "Jews are thieves, what an unethical religion". When a Jewish retailer overcharges, the customer does not say "Joe Schwartz is a thief", but rather "Jews are thieves, what an unjust God".

As we learn in the midrash (Seder Eliyahu Rabbah, Chap. 26, p. 140, transl. by Braude and Kapstein, p. 346):

When a man is not loving in his business dealings, even if he learns Torah and studies Mishnah, people who see him say: "woe to so-and-so who has studied Torah! ." Thus, through such a man, is the name of Heaven desecrated.

Conversely, when a Jew is scrupulously honest, it not only reflects well on him; it reflects well on the entire Jewish people and on God. As we learn in the classic story about Shimon ben Shetah (Yerushalmi Bava Batra 2:5, fol. 8c):

Shimon ben Shetah was in the flax trade. His students said to him: 'retire from the flax trade and we will buy you a donkey and you won't have to work so hard'. They bought a donkey for him from a non-Jewish trader. As it turned out, a precious gem was hanging from its neck. They came to him and said: 'from now on you won't have to work any more!' He replied: 'why not?' They explained: 'we bought you a donkey from a non-Jewish trader and we found a precious gem hanging from its

neck'. Shimon said: 'And did its master know?' They replied: 'no'. He said: 'go and return it. do you think I am a barbarian?! I want to hear the non-Jew say "blessed be the God of the Jews" more than I want all the material rewards of this world!'

I would like to conclude with the words of a hassidic rabbi, Rav Nachman of Kossover.

He taught that we should always have the Lord in our thoughts. He was asked: 'Can we think of the Lord when we are engaged in buying and selling?' 'Surely we can,' answered the Rabbi. 'If we are able to think of business when we are praying, we should be able to think of praying when we are doing business' (Louis Newman, *The Hasidic Anthology*, p. 343).

This, then, is our choice as Jews. We can choose to emulate the CEO of Enron or Rav Safra of Babylon; the CEO of Andersen or Shimon ben Shetah of Jerusalem. The choice is ours.

## **Mensch•Mark For Elul 11**

### **[A Perceptive Heart-Middah Sichlut HaLev](#)**

This text is taken from the Book of Ecclesiastes, attributed to Kohelet, the son of David. In it we are given instructions as to how to derive the most out of life. We are told that it is the heart that has the power to lead us in the right direction so that we might enjoy our lives.

The rabbis tell us that while it is important to have an understanding heart (*Middah Binat Ha-Lev*), it is not enough. We must also have a perceptive heart. When we are confronted with difficult decisions we respond both intellectually and emotionally. We use both our minds and our hearts but it is the perceptive heart, the heart that helps us apply the lessons we have learned from experience to our decision-making that makes the difference.

The Talmud records an argument over the meaning of the question, "But wisdom, where shall it be found? (Job 28:12) R. Eliezer said: In the head. But R. Joshua said: In the heart". (*Midrash Prov.*) Among the sages and scholars, wisdom traditionally meant common sense (*sechel*) and good judgment in everyday matters-knowing, for example, when to speak and when not to, when to act and when not to (*Voices of Wisdom*). No single set of rules can tell us what we should do in every circumstance or how to navigate our way through new situations. All we can do is to consult that inner good sense we have been cultivating in our hearts through study and deeds, and hope that it will enable us to make good decisions.

Throughout Jewish history and folklore, the rabbis have reasoned their way around difficult questions through the use of stories. Of all the elements in Jewish folklore, the parable is probably the most revered. The Hebrew name for it is *mashal* and it includes stories, fables and brief allegories. The parable is not just an ingenious and entertaining

story. It is subtle and imaginative, containing both wisdom and common-sense understanding of both the heights and limitations of the human being. The rabbis of the Talmud loved to use parables to teach lessons. It is these lessons that help us develop a perceptive heart.

An example of a parable is the story of the man who was carrying a heavy load of wood on his shoulders. When he grew weary he let the bundle down and cried bitterly, "O Death, come and take me."

Immediately, the Angel of Death appeared and asked, "Why do you call me?"

Frightened, the man replied, "Please help me place the load back on my shoulders." (*A Treasury of Jewish Folklore*)

Rabbi Eugene Borowitz reminds us that foolish "sages", more naïve than wise, populate the literature of every age and society. Our 19<sup>th</sup> century Eastern European ancestors gave us "The Wise Men of Chelm" as our very own archetypical fools. According to one Chelm story, when God created humans God wanted to distribute the wise and foolish souls evenly across the earth. While flying over Poland, the bag got caught on a mountain peak, and many of the souls drifted down to Chelm, a town in Poland. Many people, in fact, complained that Chelm got more than its share of foolish souls. A wonderful source of both humor and wisdom, the Chelm stories help us realize just how closely wisdom and foolishness are connected. (In fact, the Hebrew word for foolishness is *sechel*, spelled *samech-kuf-lamed*, which has an identical etymology to the Hebrew word for wisdom, *sechel* spelled *sin-kuf-lamed*). These stories remind us that there is a little foolishness in every wise person and a little wisdom in every fool.

Here is an example of Chelm wisdom:

The people of Chelm were worriers. So they called a meeting to do something about the problem of worry. A motion was duly made and seconded to the effect that Yossel, the cobbler, be retained by the community as a whole, to do its worrying, and that his fee be one ruble per week. The motion was about to carry, all speeches having been for the affirmative, when one sage asked the fatal question: "If Yossel earned a ruble a week, what would he have to worry about?" (*A Treasury of Jewish Folklore*)

MARLENE MYERSON

## **[Toyota, Auschwitz and Chelm](#) (Jewish Week, 2010)**

Tomorrow, I'll be joining the March of the Living, an annual pilgrimage from Poland to Israel.

The experience of the Holocaust stands alone in Jewish history, a godless counterpoint to all things sacred. Alongside the majestic peaks of Sinai and Zion, our view now includes this man-made mountain of children's shoes, empty luggage and echoing shrieks, a clump of human refuse that dwarfs everything around it, taller than Sinai, more imposing than Zion, more insurmountable than Everest.

As I prepare to face the enormity of Auschwitz for the first time, it occurs to me that since the Shoah, rabbis have become like Toyota salesmen. What, after all, are we selling, but a product once revered, but now proven to be a grand farce. The myth has been summarily detonated, the brand exposed. Just as "Made in Japan" now has reverted to its original derogatory, postwar meaning (cheap, fake, laughable), "Made at Sinai" now feels like its "Made in Japan."

Oh, we rabbis have been trained well. We've developed numerous diversionary strategies to refocus the question ("Where was God? Well, where was MAN?") or simply to foster a perpetual state of denial ("We can't know God's ways"). Some have chosen to relinquish some of God's omnipotence, others go much farther. But for the most part, we focus on beating home the message that Judaism still has an important function to serve, even if there's a gaping hole under the hood. Some deny that the hole exists, clinging naively to pre-Auschwitz fantasies. It is astonishing how many otherwise intelligent, modern, skeptical Jews buy this theological nonsense, slickly packaged by various ultra-Orthodox groups. But most rabbis, while not denying the seriousness of the challenge, prefer to set the questions aside, suggesting that maybe the next generation will solve the problem.

Over the decades, there have been brilliant attempts to deal with this dilemma. Some, like Richard Rubenstein's existentialist "After Auschwitz," have been powerfully honest. Such radical theologies proliferated in the '60s, during the so called "Death of God" era. Since then, God has survived quite nicely, thank you, but those bold theologies have yellowed with age. The question of Auschwitz remains as vivid as ever, but after 65 years, we seem to be tiring of asking it.

It makes me wonder: If Toyotas never get fixed, but for 65 years company propagandists spew forth the message that the cars are really safe, will we start believing in them again? Will the producers just wear us down until we tire of asking the questions? That strategy seems to have worked with other products. Some people actually think that cable news is really news. Some Jews believe that the same God who was silent in Auschwitz actually caused Iraqi Scuds to miss their targets in TelAviv. The madness has worn us down.

Perhaps the antidote to such madness is a different kind of madness. The day after we march on Auschwitz, my group will stop off on the way to Warsaw in a quaint town

called Chelm, for Jews the eternal capital of absurdity. Chelmites are mythical Jews from a real town, known for their propensity to take logic to its bizarre extreme.

*Two men of Chelm went out for a walk, when suddenly it began to rain. "Quick," said one. "Open your umbrella." "It won't help," said his friend. "My umbrella is full of holes." "Then why did you bring it?" "I didn't think it would rain!"*

A New York based Klezmer group named Golem wrote a song recently about a Chelmite who leaves on a journey to Warsaw, gets lost and ends up back in Chelm. "He's so stupid that he thinks he's actually in Warsaw," bandleader Annette Ezekiel told SPIN.com. "The moral is any place can be any place else -- it doesn't matter where you are."

But for me, it will matter a lot. I'll be coming from Auschwitz, the darkest place in Jewish history, and then I'll be staying over in Chelm, the funniest. Chelm will be the place where I wash my hands after visiting this countrywide cemetery, a way station before I head to Jerusalem for the second part of the March.

Two points about Chelm. First, laughter provided a great outlet for those suffering from hunger, poverty and hatred, as the Jews of Poland did for so long. But rather than laugh at real people, the Jewish genius invented a mythical community to laugh at. Not only is that practical (as opposed to laughing at Poles, who might respond by killing you), it is far more ethical to make fun of fake people than real people.

Second, Chelm might hold the key to our getting beyond the theological quandaries of our age. If the commanding voice of Auschwitz has muffled the God of Sinai for the time being, maybe we need to pay more attention to the God of Chelm. The Yiddish aphorism, "Man plans, God laughs," just might be the most apt theological response to an age of absurdity. It's not that God is laughing at us, simply that God has taught us that laughter is the only way one can respond to a world of unfathomable evil and unspeakable tragedy, while clinging to life and dignity.

Maintaining some semblance of sanity requires a modicum of insanity, an art we've been perfecting for centuries, ever since we figured out how a poor peasant living in rags could be transformed into royalty through the simple act of lighting candles, drinking wine and blessing hallah on a Friday night. If that isn't a little taste of madness, what is? The first Jewish kid, whose life was replete with tragedy, was nonetheless named laughter (Isaac). We've been re-living Isaac's story ever since.

Would you buy a used Toyota from this God? Perhaps not. But at least the divine gift of laughter gives us the courage to stare directly into that gaping hole in the chassis and laugh at the absurdity of it all, while gasping in amazement that, despite everything, we are alive.

## Mensch•Mark For Elul 12

### Modesty-Middah Anavah

This text illustrates the Jewish attitude toward humility and pride. Excessive pride is destructive; humility is the preferred path. There are several instances in the biblical text where we are counseled to be humble and to guard against pride. The rewards of *anavah*—humility—are "awe of Adonai, wealth, honor and life." (Proverbs 22:4) "Recognizing one's own insignificance leads a person to humility and fear (awe) of God. In turn, God will reward such an individual with success." (*The Stone Edition of the Tanach* p.1599)

According to the *Machzor Vitry*, humility allows one to ask questions when one does not understand; conceit and arrogance are impediments to the acquisition of Torah. As the commentator interprets in the *ArtScroll Pirke Avos*,

"One who overestimates one's own intellectual abilities is liable to denigrate the dignity and sanctity of the Torah and its teachers and bearers, thus blocking his or her own path towards wisdom. Hence, awe and reverence born of humility will protect one from missteps and errors in practical observance and moral judgment." (pp.413-414)

If an individual is convinced of the depth of his or her own abilities and intelligence there is very little room for learning and growth. Humility gives us that space within ourselves for personal development.

Rav Abraham Issac Kook taught that humility should lead to joy, courage, and inner dignity.

The observance of *anavah* should not lead one to belittle oneself. Even in the quest for humility, there needs to be a balance with self-esteem and confidence.

A Hasidic teaching illustrates this balance. Rabbi Bunim taught:

Every person should have two pockets. In one pocket should be a piece of paper saying: "I am but dust and ashes." When one is feeling too proud, reach into this pocket and take out this paper and read it. In the other pocket should be a piece of paper saying: "For my sake was the world created." When one is feeling disheartened and lowly, reach into this pocket and take this paper out and read it. We are each the joining of two worlds. We are fashioned from clay, but our spirit is the breath of Adonai. (*Tales of The Hasidim Later Masters*, Martin Buber, p.249-50)

## Mensch•Mark For Elul 13

### [Absorb Knowledge and Add To It-Middah Shomaya U'mosif](#)

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*Masters*, Martin Buber, p.249-50) Acquiring Torah is not about repeating what one has learned but rather learning and going further than one's teacher.

The French medieval scholar Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki, known by the acronym Rashi, taught that a learner must listen to his/her teachers and understand the implication of the teachers' words so that the learner will be able to expand on what has been taught. Rashi cautions that the learner should not contradict the words of a teacher, but rather look to support them.

A wonderful example of a learner who went further than his teacher is Rabbi Akiva. At the age of forty, Akiva was a totally unlearned individual. Akiva worked as a simple shepherd never having studied a day in his life. While standing at a well one day he asked a friend, "Who hollowed out this wellstone?" The friend replied, "Akiva, haven't you read in Torah that 'water wears away stone' (Job 14:19)? It was water from the well falling upon it constantly, day after day that wore away the stone" explained his friend. Akiva asked himself: Is my mind harder than this stone? I will go and study and learn at least one section of Torah. With his son, Akiva went to the schoolhouse and together they began to learn the *alef bet*. Akiva went on studying until he had mastered the entire Torah.

Akiva then went to study with Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Joshua, asking them to teach him Mishnah-Jewish law. They taught him one law and he went off to reason it out by himself. Akiva kept returning to his teachers asking more and more questions until he left his teachers unable to respond. In all, Akiva spent twelve years learning from them, but during that time Rabbi Eliezer paid very little attention to him. The first time Akiva was able to best his teacher, Rabbi Joshua, quoting Scripture, said to Rabbi Eliezer, "There is the army you paid no attention to; now go out and fight it." (Judges 9:38) Rabbi Akiva had overtaken the learning of his teacher.

It is written about Rabbi Akiva that he was a shepherd for forty years, he studied Torah for forty years and he guided Israel for forty years. ( *Sifre* Deuteronomy)

## **Mensch•Mark For Elul 14**

### **[Calmness in Study-Middah Yishuv BeMikra](#)**

## **Mensch•Mark For Elul 15**

### **[Set Others on the Path of Truth-Middah Ma'amido al HaEmet](#)**

## **Mensch•Mark For Elul 16**

## [Cleaving to Friends-Middah Dibuk Chaverim](#)

### **Mensch•Mark For Elul 17**

## [Setting Others on the Path of Peace-Middah Ma'amido al HaShalom](#)

#### **Text**

"Hillel says: Be among the disciples of Aaron, loving peace and pursuing peace, loving people and bringing them closer to the Torah." (*Avot* 1:12)

#### **Commentary**

Aaron, the brother of Moses, was considered an exemplar of a peacemaker among his people. It is told that when Aaron saw two people at odds with each other, he would approach each one separately, without the other one's knowledge, and say, "Why are you fighting with your friend? He begged me to approach you and arrange a reconciliation." With this tactic, Aaron was able to bring about peace between the two people. (*Pirkei Avos Treasury*, p. 38)

Similarly, if a man and his wife were experiencing marital problems, Aaron would even allow himself to be degraded in order to restore harmony between them. In gratitude, couples whose marriages he had strengthened would often name their next son after him. At Aaron's funeral, there were said to be eighty thousand other "Aarons" that walked behind his casket. (*Kallah Rabbasi* 3)

The concept of peace (*shalom*) can refer to intra-personal, interpersonal, and international relationships. Without inner peace, a person is anxious, confused, and hurting. Without communal peace, each person is isolated, separate, and detached. Without global peace, our world will remain in pieces, fractious and fractured. The need for a unified and harmonious whole exists in a person, in a family, in a people, and in all peoples. *Shalom* is still an unrealized ideal.

Language itself hints at the centrality of peace in Jewish tradition. The word *shalom* carries a wealth of positive meanings. Referring not only to the absence of war, *shalom* also means "safety," "wholeness," "completion," "fulfillment," "prosperity," and "peace of mind and heart." In English, "peace" is often understood to be the absence of something—a lack of conflict. In Hebrew, *shalom* is understood to be the presence of something—a sense of well-being and fulfillment. (Artson, *It's a Mitzvah*, p. 121)

How can *Ma'amido al HaShalom* (setting others on the path of peace) lead to becoming a Torah-wise person? In a commentary on this *middah*, it is suggested that by being flexible and ready to compromise when possible, and legitimate, the Torah scholar promotes peace among people (*Midrash Shmuel*) and increases peace in the world. (*Berachos 64a*)

## **Mensch•Mark For Elul 18**

### **Concentrate on One's Studies-Middah Mityashev Libo** **BeTalmudo**

#### **Text**

"Who studies gladly for a single hour will learn vastly more than one who studies glumly for hours on end." (Hayyim of Valozhin, a Lithuanian talmudist of the 18th century)

#### **Commentary**

One of the 48 qualities needed to acquire Torah is the ability to concentrate on one's studies. Concentration is focusing one's undivided attention for a particular purpose.

As mentioned in the translation, there are several different interpretations of this *middah*. In *Midrash Samuel*, the commentator understands this *middah* to mean "thinking deliberately in one's study." This means that the learner studies in a composed and steady way rather than quickly and haphazardly. The commentary *Tiferes Yisrael* characterizes the learner in this *middah* as one who thoroughly prepares before giving a Torah lecture or presentation. The competent scholar prepares not only content but also the style of presentation. The commentary *Sfas Emes* translates this *middah* as, "ne whose heart becomes composed by Torah study." This describes the individual who, though beset by problems, is able to subdue them by deep, concentrated Torah study. The Chofetz Chaim understood this *middah* to say, "one's heart derives the lessons of one's learning." Simply put, the learner internalizes the lessons of the Torah and lives his/her life completely by them. (*Pirkei Avos Ethics of the Fathers*, p.422)

Reuven Bulka taught the following interpretation of this *middah*,

"One may be involved with the destiny of others, but is still important to concentrate on Torah by being studious in learning, by recognizing that even though one has reached the point of being able to teach others, nevertheless, it is still important to continue being a student oneself." (*As A Tree by the Waters*, p.258)

In each of these instances, the commentator is describing the way in which the learner approaches Torah, the intent with which the learner studies and how that study manifests itself in the learner. All of these take concentration and focus which is reflected in this text: "Who studies gladly for a single hour will learn vastly more than one who studies glumly for hours on end." In other words, concentrated learning for one hour is more effective than several hours of uninspired learning.

The Talmud says, "If you see a student who finds it as hard as iron to study, it is because his/her studies are without system." (*Ta'anit*) We affect our own ability to concentrate, to focus and to learn. There are all sorts of ways to create your own system of study. Some learners thrive in study groups, others need to read in isolation, some learners take notes or make outlines. Some learn best by hearing a lecture or presentation others by a hands-on experience. Each of us as a learner is unique and we each must find our own way to concentrate and learn.

## **Mensch•Mark For Elul 19**

### **[Sharp Discussion with Students-Middah Pipul HaTalmidim](#)**

#### **Text**

"Rabbi Hama son of Rabbi Hanina said: What is implied by the verse 'Iron sharpens iron' (Proverbs 27:17) It tells you that just as one piece of iron sharpens another, so two scholars sharpen each other's mind by discussion of the Law." (*Sefer Ha Aggadah - Legends of the Jews*, 428:260)

#### **Commentary**

Intense debate and discussion have a long history in Jewish tradition. As early as the book of Genesis we read of Abraham debating with God the destiny of the citizens of Sodom and Gomorrah. It was through debate that Abraham learns that there are no righteous people in these cities and therefore they do not merit being saved.

The *middah* of *pilpul hatalmidim* teaches two values: the value of debate and the value of learning with others.

Debate sharpens one's mind and makes the subject under discussion clearer. As the Text asserts, "iron sharpens iron." Spirited and learned discussion elevates one's thinking. It pushes one to higher realms of learning, thinking, and understanding.

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch taught,

"Isolation is incompatible with Jewish knowledge; it is only by association with living sages, in close communion with associates, and by the clarity of thought and judgment that can be attained by teaching it to disciples that the knowledge of Torah can be nurtured and allowed to flourish." (*Chapters of the Fathers*, Hirsch p.105)

Simply put, one must combine a relationship with sages, a closeness with colleagues, and sharp discussion with students in order to tap all the resources of Torah knowledge. (*Pirkei Avos*, ArtScroll, p. 415)

Rabbah bar Bar Hanah said:

"Why are words of Torah likened to fire, as in the verse, 'Is not My word like fire? says Adonai' (Jeremiah 23:29) To teach you that just as fire does not ignite itself, so words of Torah do not abide in one who studies alone."

Simply put, we are to be *samayach b'chelko*—satisfied with our portion from the effort we expend in life whether it is in acquisition of material possessions or acquisition of skills and knowledge not the number of possessions we have or the level of learning we achieve. It is in the doing, not the acquiring, that satisfaction and happiness are to come.

## **Mensch•Mark For Elul 20**

### **[Contentment with One's Lot-Middah Samayach B'Chelko](#)**

#### **Text**

"Ben Zoma said: Who is rich? Those who are happy with their portion." (Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 32a also found in *Pirkei Avot* 4:1)

#### **Commentary**

Being content with one's portion is an age-old Jewish concern. In the book of Proverbs, we read, "A joyful heart makes a cheerful face; A sad heart makes a despondent mood. All the days of a poor person are wretched, but contentment is a feast without end." (Proverbs 15:13 and 15)

To be truly joyful with one's lot in life is wise advice. It is a wonderful way to live, but how easy is it to adopt this attitude? How many of us are truly satisfied with our portion? How do we recognize our own good fortune? All around us the world advertises the goods and services we all seem to "need." Our world is characterized by material acquisition, and to paraphrase a popular game show "who 'wouldn't' want to be a millionaire?"

This obsession with our "needs" is not just a contemporary concern. Solomon Ibn Gabirol, an eleventh-century Spanish poet-philosopher taught: "Who seeks more than he needs, hinders himself from enjoying what he has. Seek what you need and give up what you need not. For in giving up what you don't need, you'll learn what you really do need." (*Mivhar Hapeninim* 155,161 as found in *The Jewish Moral Virtues*, Borowitz and Schwartz, p.164)

This is the challenge—balancing what we need and what we want in order to become *samayach b'chelko*—satisfied with our portion.

Several commentators have suggested a variety of reasons why one should be *samayach b'chelko* - satisfied with one's portion. Reuven Bulka has written, "Whatever bounty and good one is given in life should be greatly appreciated. Unlike affliction, which one lives with by almost ignoring it and transcending it, that which one has been granted which seems to be beneficial should be accepted in joy." (*As A Tree By The Waters* p. 256)

As it relates to acquisition of Torah, *Midrash Samuel* states, "...one must be happy that one can be involved in the study of God's word."

Our personal attitudes affect how we study and what we acquire through our studies. According to *Machzor Vitry*, if a person spends time worrying and brooding over one's portion of this world's pleasures (i.e., material possessions) one cannot concentrate on learning.

The *Ruach Chaim* explains that one's lot means one's ability to learn and comprehend. A person should not be dissatisfied if he or she cannot live up to one's ambitions or the standards of others with greater ability, one should do one's best and constantly review until the learning is mastered. In the end the individual will succeed and even excel. (*The Pirkei Avos Treasury* p. 418)

Samson Raphael Hirsch taught that just as we should be satisfied with our portion of earthly goods, so too should we rejoice in the measure of intellectual talent we have been granted. For one should derive satisfaction from the knowledge that one has faithfully used one's abilities for the advancement of one's skills and learning, for God evaluates the achievements of each of us solely in terms of the extent to which one has made good use of one's intellectual abilities. (*Chapters of the Fathers*, p. 107)

**MY TAKE: (EXCERPTS FROM A [Yom Kippur Sermon on Happiness](#))**

*Introducing: the Most Interesting [Jew in the World](#).*

- On Passover, Elijah opens the door - for *him!*
- He once caught a *real gefilte fish*.

- On Purim, he comes dressed – *as himself!*
- He can do Hagba AND Glilah – *at the same time!*
- At Tashlich, the fish throw his bread *back*.

He is... *the most interesting Jew in the world.*

*Stay thirsty, my friends.*

Seriously. Stay thirsty.

To no one's surprise, the guy who plays the most interesting man in the world in the commercials, an actor named Jonathan Goldsmith, IS Jewish. And why wouldn't he be? We may or may not be the Chosen people, but we *are*, without a doubt, the most interesting.

But does being interesting make us happy? And if not, what does?

So now, the camera is turned on us. Today, a sermon selfie. Enough with the whats and wheres. Today, we look squarely in the mirror and see what stares back. Who are we? What can give us fulfillment?

Last week I spoke of a prayer that frames the liturgy, which we recited at the very beginning of the service and will recite at the very end of Yom Kippur tonight. And that prayer asks the question. *Mah Hasdenu?*

*Hesed* is kindness, goodness. Unconditional love. Tenderness. Consideration. Empathy. Profound connection. Steadfast love. There is really [no precise equivalent](#) in English. In fact a word was created to approximate it: "loving-kindness." But *Hesed* is not kindness as in when you let someone go in front of you in a long line at Stop and Shop. *Hesed* is much deeper than that.

It's mentioned over and over in the Bible, [a total of 250 times](#), involving heroes like Ruth and David. Abraham was a *hesed* machine. Jeremiah defines *Hesed* as an Ahavat Olam – Pure, unbounded love.

The prophet Micah defines *Hesed* further, in a verse that concludes this afternoon's haftarah as an add-on to the story of Jonah:

*"(Mi el Kamocha) Who is a God like unto You, that pardons iniquity, and passes by the transgression of the remnant of His heritage? He retains not anger forever, because Hesed makes God happy. (Ke Hafetz hesed hu.)"*

Hesed, then, is the key to God's happiness - and our own. Hesed allows God to "let it go," to overcome anger and indignation. So the question "Mah Hasdenu?" really is a way of asking, "How can we find happiness?"

What I'd like to do today is unpack that idea some more. Because in our world there is such profound sadness. I don't know, it seems to be even more prevalent than at any time since 9/11. Signs of unhappiness are everywhere.

Jacob Burak, a financial and cultural guru, wrote last month in Aeon magazine that Humans seem to be hard-wired for bad news, angry faces and sad memories. He says that we have a "negativity bias.":

*"...While a good day has no lasting effect on the following day, a bad day carries over. We process negative data faster and more thoroughly than positive data, and they affect us longer. Socially, we invest more in avoiding a bad reputation than in building a good one. Emotionally, we go to greater lengths to avoid a bad mood than to experience a good one."*

Needless to say, Jacob Burak is Jewish. If human beings have a bias for negativity, Jews are "exhibit a". We veer toward the negative. We look up at the ceiling and our eyes are drawn toward the missing tile right away. Of the 613 mitzvot, only 248 are positive. 365 are thou-shalt-nots, enough for us to break one negative commandment each day of the year. Even some of the *positive* commandments have been given a negative spin. Like the greatest of them all, "Love your neighbor as yourself," which was reframed by the sage Hillel as, "What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor." He takes the ultimate positive and flips it over to its negative side. Hillel, it seems, like the rest of the Jewish people, needs a shrink.

As Henny Youngman put it, *Why don't Jews drink? It interferes with our suffering.*

As Leonard Fein, a great Jewish pundit who died recently, used to say, a Jewish telegram is one that reads, "Start worrying. Letter follows." Fein goes on, "We worry about everything. We worry about Israel, we worry about anti-Semitism, we worry about demographics, we worry about war, we worry about peace. When someone says "All's right with the world," we know that something must be wrong; he has overlooked the cloud, the flaw, the imminent crisis. He has been lulled; the storm is brewing just out of sight, we can feel it in our ancient bones."

So here's where we are. Everything around is conspiring to drag us down. The tragic death of Robin Williams brought home to us the prevalence of depression and mental illness in our society. Last year [a study in England](#) warned that teenagers are becoming increasingly unhappy, with growing concerns about school, their appearance and the amount of freedom they have. At about the same time the [New Yorker reported](#) that going online



makes us unhappy – primarily because we become jealous of all the people on social media who seem to be doing so much better than us.

If it's not our emotional wiring, it's our culture, it's our perfect neighbors, it's our health or it's the body's inexorable decline; it's our mortality. The rise of mental illness is being called [an epidemic](#), where the CDC, last year, reported that the suicide rate among Americans ages 35–64 years increased 28.4 percent between 1999 and 2010, where our society [breeds anxiety, depression and dysfunction](#), where people who seem to have every reason to be happy, suffer horribly, and the symptoms aren't recognized or properly treated, and they do horrible things to themselves and others.

No doubt many of us here have had to stave off bouts of depression. Let me amend that. All of us. All of us. For some the issues are clinical, for others circumstantial – and for some, both.

"Life," said Woody Allen, "is full of misery, loneliness and suffering - and it's all over much too soon."

Oy.

Can't we ever be happy?

Yes we can. And that brings us back to *Ma Hasdenu*? For while Jews may not score well on the happiness scale, Judaism provides us with the *keys* to happiness. True, we are glass half empty people, but ours is a glass half full tradition. So let's learn from it. Here are nine quick lessons Judaism teaches us:

### **Lesson one: Recognize that Happiness is a worthy and attainable goal.**

It's OK not to feel burdened and guilty all the time. Sometimes we feel guilty when we feel good. Alan Cohen defined guilt as "punishing yourself before God doesn't".

Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav said, "*Mitzvah g'dolah lihyot b'simcha tamid.*" "It is a great mitzvah to be happy always." "He understood, way before Freud, that sadness could lead to sickness – even though Nachman himself struggled deeply with depression. Aristotle called happiness "the chief good," the end towards which all other things aim. And in full agreement, Moses Chayim Luzzato, who in the 18<sup>th</sup> century wrote "The Path of the Just," begins the first chapter saying, "Man is created to take pleasure." For him, there was no greater pleasure than seeking closeness with God.

Which brings us to **Lesson Two: Come to Services.**

I believe that religion has an enormous role to play in combating the incessant negativity, cynicism, alienation and depression that surrounds us. Surveys show a distinct correlation

between happiness and frequency of church attendance in America. But oftentimes, religion is accused of fostering a false sense of happiness by denying harsh realities. I can't speak for other faiths, but that's not true for Judaism. Judaism is not a religion that teaches us to comfort someone on his deathbed by saying that he is going to a "better place." Judaism does not promote the kind of saccharine happiness that denies life's struggles; but rather a deep, rich affirmation of life, with no denial, recognizing our mortality. And it's a life that *connects* – a life of *Hesed*.

### **Lesson three: Remove the Masks.**

Happiness happens when we get real. Rav Kook, in his classic work on Teshuvah, stated, "The primary role of penitence is for the person to return to himself, to the root of his soul." That's where Carlebach got the lyrics to the song – return to the root of your soul.

This implies a deep acceptance of who we are.

My colleague Rabbi Irwin Kula has tried something different at his congregation in Chicago. During Neilah, in fact while reciting our prayer, *Mah anahnu, mah hayenu?* (What are we? What are our lives?), he leads a ten minute, "*Who am I*" exercise, conducted in pairs.

Each person is allotted five minutes to answer; then the roles reverse. A sample dialogue:

"*Who are you?*" "I'm Joshua Hammerman."

"*Who are you?*" "I'm a father."

"*Who are you?*" "I'm a son."

"*Who are you?*" "I'm a husband."

Kula says, "By the thirtieth question, the answers reach the level of vulnerability."

"*Who are you?*" "I'm lonely."

"*Who are you?*" "I'm scared."

In a room this big, that's harder to do. But it's an exercise worth trying in a more intimate setting.

### **Lesson Four: Let it Go.**

With apologies to Idina Menzel.

That song from the film "Frozen" has been without doubt the most repeated and reinterpreted song of the year, except for one. Every little kid I know is singing this

song. And some grown ups too. Because, in large part, we recognize that we all need to “let it go” in order to be happy. As we saw from the prophet Micah, even God needs to let it go.

The Talmud tells of a drought, when Rabbi Eliezer prayed for rain, but nothing happened. Rabbi Akiva offered a short prayer and the rains fell. A Voice from Heaven called out, “Not that Akiva is any better than Eliezer, but Eliezer carries a grudge against those who slight him, while Akiva forgets it and moves on.”

The Talmud is clearly telling us – if you don’t let go of your anger or your pain, it will only compound your troubles and make you less able to live a productive life. So let it go.

### **Lesson Five: Cultivate He-sed-ic Communities**

Not Hasidic – but *Hesed-ic*. Communities filled with Hesed. Rabbi Israel Salanter, the 19th century founder of the Mussar movement, saw a scholar with a forlorn look on his face during the days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. The scholar said he was worried because *these are the days when God is judging us*. To which Salanter replied, “But other people won’t realize that that’s what’s bothering you. They might think that you are upset with them.”

In order to be truly happy, we’ve truly got to care about the happiness of others.

Not long ago, PBS aired a film called “Happy,” tracking the phenomenon all over the world. The producer spoke about how he had heard that happy people tend to be healthier, get sick less often and live longer than unhappy people – and that for some reason, the oldest people in the world came from Okinawa in Japan.

He went there on a whim and found that it was a resounding YES, they were happy. The key is was how different generations come together on a regular basis. One day, he noticed a group of elderly women visiting a preschool as the kids were having a footrace. The grandmothers convened at finish line. They hugged all the kids as they finished. The producer went to congratulate a grandmother about having such a grandkid.

She said, ‘That’s not my grandchild. None of these are my grandkids.’ She was asked, ‘Is this your friend’s?’ She said, ‘*None of the women here are related to any of these children.*’

I would love to see that happen at every bar mitzvah here. Total strangers of the older generations hugging all the kids as they cross the finish line. That is a culture that promotes happiness.

### **Lesson Six: Fake it**

Nachman of Bratzlav also said, “If you are not happy, *pretend to be*. Even if you are totally depressed, act happy. Genuine joy will follow.”

This one might leave you skeptical, but Reb Nachman believed that when we activate joy, it ignites a spark inside us, it opens up our aliveness and lets us see the world from a God’s eye view. As Rabbi Mark Novak put it in a recent issue of Moment magazine in a section about happiness, “Putting on a smile is not intended to cover over anything, but to make room for *what is here* – the divine presence – in each breathing, sacred moment. The smile, which leads us to joy, which leads us to wonder, calls upon the child within us to live with curiosity and creativity.”

In that same issue, Rabbi Gershon Wimkler wrote, “Happiness should not be something we strive for. It should be entrenched deeply within us.” And he’s right. Despite the unimaginable tragedies we have faced, we are a people known for our ability to rise above our sadness and smile. Happiness for us is much more than an emotion. It is a divine imperative.

### **Lesson Seven: Laugh your way through the tears.**

When we ask, *Mah Hasdenu*, what causes us to smile even when we don’t feel like it – it’s our sense of humor.

Henny Youngman put it in the form of a joke: *says I go to the doctor and the doctor says I have six months to live. I told him I can’t pay him. So he gave me six months more.*

That is the quintessential Jewish joke. We all have six months. We’re all up against literally a dead-line. But if we can laugh at it and stand up to it, it will give us a reprieve from the sadness – and that’s like bargaining for six months more.

Writer Jay Michelson calls the uniquely Jewish form of happiness “unhappy happiness,” “a kind of happiness that lies beneath the surface; beneath, that is, what we ordinarily understand to be sadness or joy. A middle path between two unsatisfactory alternatives: what he calls “the Botox-smiling cheer of the American Dream on the one hand (in which unrelenting peppiness coexists with some of the world’s highest levels of depression and dissatisfaction), and the self-defeating “Oy Vey” of Jewish irascibility.”

Can we talk? Joan Rivers, made us laugh right up to the end, when she made us cry. She once said, in a moment not intended to draw giggles, “I enjoy life when things are happening. I don’t care if it’s good things or bad things. That means you’re alive.”

### **Lesson Eight: Stay in the moment**

There’s an app, Track Your Happiness, which allows people to report their feelings in real time. Its developer discovered that we’re least happy when we allow our minds to wander

from the task at hand. That's because when our minds wander, we tend to obsess about things that worry us.

So if your mind is wandering now, you're probably worried. If you are focusing on me, you are much happier.

But even as we focus on that task, we can also get immersed in it – lost in it. I know that I am often happiest when I look up at the clock and can't believe how much time has elapsed. Having a direction, a goal, really helps, even if we may never finish what we've started. The sages were onto something when they stated that it is not ours to *complete* the task, but neither is it ours to desist from it.

### **Lesson Nine: Embrace your brokenness.**

The Hebrew word for happiness, "Simcha" was found adjacent to signatures at the bottom of medieval legal documents found in the attic of a Cairo synagogue. Now legal documents don't typically ask us to express emotion. So scholars concluded that the real meaning of the Hebrew word "simcha" is not "joy," but "acceptance." And that is what, for Judaism, happiness is all about. Acceptance of what we can't change and learning to live with it.

There's that famous story that was first reported years ago in the Houston Chronicle, about Itzak Perlman once breaking a string during a performance in 1995. Rather than waiting for a new string to be attached, he just kept on playing. When he finished, the newspaper reported, there was an awesome silence in the room. And then people rose and cheered. There was an extraordinary outburst of applause from every corner of the auditorium.

He smiled, wiped the sweat from his brow, raised his bow to quiet us, and then he said -- not boastfully, but in a quiet, pensive, reverent tone -- "*You know, sometimes it is the artist's task to find out how much music you can still make with what you have left.*"

You might notice that when I send out death notices, I use the traditional Hebrew response to tragic news, "Baruch Dayan Emet," "Blessed be the truthful Judge." You might wonder how we could possibly say a blessing for bad news. A student asked that very same question of Rabbi Eliemelech. He was instructed to go to the study hall and ask that question to Reb Zusya." When the student laid eyes on Reb Zusya, he could have easily imagined the suffering this man must have experienced in his lifetime. The pain of illness and poverty was etched on his face. The student proceeded to ask: How is it possible to bless God for bad news with equal fervor as for good news? Reb Zusya's reply: "Why are you asking me? How do I know the answer? Nothing bad has ever happened to me!"

OK. If this is supposed to be about happiness, why does it feel like the most depressing sermon of all time?

Because, I have a secret to tell you. *Life is really depressing.*

And so many of us have learned, the hard way, that happiness does not come automatically from wealth, fame or power, or the instant gratification of our every whim or desire, or an addiction to what feels, smells or tastes good. Revenge does not bring about happiness, nor does unlimited freedom to do whatever you want, whenever you want, without any obligations or responsibilities. Happiness does not come from the indulgence of the self at the expense of others. If you live this way, you will soon understand why Oscar Wilde said, "Some cause happiness wherever they go; others whenever they go."

Happiness also does not come from the avoidance of risk or adversity.

Instead, it comes from.... This. (*Put on Pharrell hat*)

I said that "Let it Go" the most repeated and reinterpreted song of the year, except one. Well, this is the one: Pharrell Williams' irresistibly infectious song "Happy" is one of the best selling of all time. Last month it became the most downloaded track ever in the UK. *Including Scotland.*

And literally just about every country on earth has created a video using this soundtrack. And I mean everywhere. From Abidjan to Zagreb. **Both** Tel Aviv AND Gaza did "Happy" videos this summer. Efrat too, right after the three Israeli teens were abducted near there. It inspired uplifting tributes from the typhoon-ravaged Philippines. How about Iran, where six young people were arrested for making a completely harmless "Happy" video. They were sentenced to lashes and forced to recant on television.

At last count, *there are over 1900 versions of the video online from 153 countries.* [There's a site online where you can find them all. The happiest website on earth.](#) The creators of the site explained that their purpose is:

*To display happiness all around the world... a beautiful humanity needs to be protected in such times of crisis, and for that we must talk about the good things rather than dwell on what goes wrong.*

Sometime this coming week, go onto that site and dance from place to place, randomly, or deliberately. Go from Abu Dhabi to Albuquerque, from the Bahamas to Johannesburg, from Madagascar to Moskow. It is powerful to see. Who knew Poland was so happy? Or Morocco? There's one in sign language from a camp for the hearing impaired in upstate New York, and a fun one from New Zealand senior citizens. This song transcends language. It is truly universal. This year, "Happy" became the new lingua franca – the language we all speak.

It's as if, in the midst of Ebola and Ukraine and the two Malaysian planes, Gaza, Syria and Iraq, the Nigerian girls and Ferguson, some inner driving force that propels the world decided to remind us that beneath all the superficial differences, beyond the politics and craziness, we're all the same. (Take off hat)

In a big square in Copenhagen, there is an enormous interactive wooden pixel screen called the Happy Wall. When I first saw it, I said to myself: *Perfect: We've got the Wailing Wall and the Scandinavians have the Happy Wall.* That's just the way it is.

But as I drew closer to the Happy Wall, it drew me in. There are 2000 wooden boards of all different colors, and people are invited to write messages on individual boards or, create patterns, animals, words or statements grouping many of the boards.

I looked at some of the messages close up.

*"Happy marriage for 30 years: Andrea and Gunnar."*

*"My family is my everything: Isabel."*

*"M.L: The answer is yes."*

Now I've never read the messages that people put into the Kotel, but the messages I saw on the Happy Wall were probably very similar – only happier. At the Happy Wall we might see, "I love my great aunt Sylvia's potato blintzes more than life itself. I'll love her forever."

At the Kotel we might see, "My great aunt Sylvia was bitten by a mosquito in the back yard. Please keep her from dying of malaria."

The messages at both walls are about caring about something beyond ourselves. And that's what make us happy. It's *Hesed*. It's unbounded love, the kind of love that makes not only makes forgiveness possible – it makes it inevitable. It's warm puppy happiness. It's *Hesed*: the key to God's happiness, and the key to ours.

## **Mensch•Mark For Elul 21**

**[Sharpening the Wisdom of One's Teacher-Middah Machkim et Rabo](#)**

## **Text**

"A wise person is a student who makes his/her teacher wiser." (*Chaggigah 14a*)

## **Commentary**

How can a student make his/her teacher wiser? For a student to learn, she must be willing to ask questions and challenge a teacher. This in turn gives the teacher the opportunity to learn as well. The ideal teacher-student relationship is one in which both are in the pursuit of knowledge and truth and neither is interested in merely proving himself/herself right.

Rabbi Joseph Telushkin writes that Jewish tradition generally regards a non-aggressive demeanor as a good trait, but not when it comes to Torah study or learning in general. He suggests that students have an obligation to question their teachers. "Jewish law dictates that you should do so respectfully, but that doesn't mean you shouldn't be aggressive." (*The Book of Jewish Values*, Telushkin, p. 476)

The Talmud tells the story about Rabbi Yochanan and his favorite student, and later learning partner, Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish. After Rabbi Shimon's death, Rabbi Yochanan became very despondent, and the other rabbis arranged for Elazar ben Pedat to study with him. Each time Rabbi Yochanan would voice his opinion, Rabbi Elazar would add, "You are right. There are authoritative statements from the Sages that confirm your opinion."

Eventually, Rabbi Yochanan became very upset and said to him:

"Do you think you are like Rabbi ben Lakish? Whenever I stated an opinion, Rabbi ben Lakish would raise twenty-four objections to what I said. He forced me to justify every ruling I gave, so that in the end, the subject was fully clarified. But all you do is tell me that you know another source that supports what I am saying. I do not need confirmation of my position. (Babylonian Talmud, *Bava Mezia 84a*)

From Rabbi Yochanan's perspective, a student who is always agreeing, and who is too respectful to challenge and question his teacher, causes his teacher to stop growing.

Of equal importance, by being assertive and questioning, the student is able to grow in knowledge and wisdom. The Talmud reveals that Rabbi Lakish grew up among gladiators and bandits and, as a young man, was totally ignorant about Judaism. After a few years of studying with, questioning, and challenging Rabbi Yochanan, he grew into one of the greatest sages of his age.

Sometimes a student remains silent out of fear that a question might offend the teacher by sounding antagonistic. On other occasions, shy or timid people say nothing because they are afraid to appear ignorant in front of the other students. The *Shulchan Aruch*, the 16th century standard code of Jewish law, addresses this dilemma. It says that a student should not be embarrassed if a fellow student has understood something after the first or second



time and she has not grasped it even after several attempts. If she is embarrassed because of this, it will turn out that s/he will come and go from the house of study without learning anything at all. (*Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 246:11*)

## **Mensch•Mark For Elul 22**

### **[Distance Yourself From Honor-Middah Mitrachayk Min](#)**

#### **[HaKavod](#)**

##### **Text**

"Ben Zoma said: Who is honored? Those who honor others." (*Avot 4,1*)

##### **Commentary**

Our Jewish sources are extremely clear on the question of honor, as revealed by our Text. We are reminded that we should focus our energies on honoring others, rather than ourselves.

It is natural for people to seek honor from their fellow human beings. However, the rabbis consistently warn that honor cannot be acquired by one who pursues it. In fact, the sages warn that if you pursue honor, it will flee from you. (*Midrash Tanhuma*) They also offer the opposite maxim that if you flee from honor, the honor pursues you. (*Exploring Jewish Ethics & Values*, p.98)

The story is told of Rabbi Avigdor Halberstam who was once a guest for Shabbat in the home of a wealthy Chasid. The custom in that house was to give a distinguished guest the honor of tasting the cholent (a stew of meat, beans and potatoes) and then serving portions to everyone else. When the cholent was brought to R. Avigdor, he took a taste and then another taste and yet another, finally finishing the contents of the large serving bowl down to the last bean. "Is there more?" he asked. He finished every morsel of the cholent, leaving nothing for any of the shocked people at the table. Later, when it was discovered that the cook had accidentally used rancid oil in the cholent. R. Avigdor preferred to appear as a glutton and suffer personal embarrassment rather than allow the cook to be humiliated in front of the others. He thus honored others at the expense of his own prestige. Is there anything more honorable than that? (*Pirket Avos Treasury*, p. 216)

We all know people who seem to need a great deal of attention and recognition, sometimes at the expense of others. The Talmudic rabbi, R. Yose son of R. Hanina, issued a warning to people who behave in that way. He cautioned: "Those who endeavor to gain honor at the price of another person being degraded have no portion in the world-to-come." (Jerusalem Talmud *Chagigah 2:1*)

There are many individuals who have been very successful in business and who choose to donate large sums of money to support various projects in the Jewish community. Sometimes they donate these funds in honor or in memory of someone else. Sometimes, they donate these funds anonymously. What a wonderful example of *mitrachayk min hakavod* (staying far from honor)! [Questioning My New Degree \(Jewish Week\)](#)

### [Questioning My New Degree](#)

**Tuesday, August 10, 2010**

**Joshua Hammerman**

**Special To The Jewish Week**

I received an honorary doctorate from the Jewish Theological Seminary this spring. I appreciate the recognition, but it has prompted some disquieting questions.

Reform and Conservative rabbis often get these diplomas, usually after about 25 years of service. So the honor has more to do with survival than accomplishment. I suppose it could be said that enduring 25 years in the rabbinate, particularly in the pulpit, is deserving of special recognition. There have been times when I wondered whether a Purple Heart might be more appropriate, or maybe a Nobel Peace Prize.

But why a doctorate? Why measure success in a spiritual profession on purely intellectual terms? Once upon a time, rabbinical seminaries were bastions of cold-fish, Litvak elitism, often then wedded to its secular, German sister, the venerable “Wissenschaft des Judentums (the science of Judaism).” But these same schools are now committed to taking Judaism out of the ivory tower, promoting, as JTS put it in its new strategic plan, “Scholarship in Service to the Jewish Community.” So shouldn’t the rabbi of the 21st century be recognized as a person of the people, not some highfalutin D.D.?

And what, really, is a Doctor of Divinity? I hear that in the United Kingdom, a D.D. is the highest honor a university can give, higher than Doctorates in law, medicine, science, letters or music. But American universities have no such hierarchy, and here it almost sounds like a degree they might confer at Hogwarts for having mastered potions and the dark arts.

How should people address me? Debretts, a website that calls itself “the modern authority on all matters etiquette, taste and achievement” favors “Dr. Cohen” over “Rabbi Cohen” for invitations and salutations. With the Jewish establishment subtly agreeing that “My kid the doctor” trumps “rabbi” on the parental aspiration scale, that trampling sound you hear is

another generation of our best and brightest running away from the rabbinate.

And why should I need an honorary title at all? Shouldn't my life-work of facilitating Jewish journeys be sufficient? Plus, my wife, who is a psychologist, worked long and hard to earn her doctorate. It makes me feel a bit uneasy about accepting one simply because I've survived.

The title "rabbi" signifies a mastery of knowledge, but it means much more. In fact, maybe my original diploma, which described the calling as "rabbi, teacher and preacher," should be updated to include more contemporary aspects of the job description, including rabble rouser, healer, marketing expert, surrogate mommy, divine exemplar, standup comic, youthful elder, dispassionate zealot and guy-who-can-unjam-the-Xerox-machine.

That's not to say I didn't accept this honor. For one thing, it came with lunch. And it was a deep privilege to share this moment with my family and leadership of my congregation, as well as a few dozen colleagues who were similarly honored. Many of them have become major figures on the Jewish scene and all have dedicated their life's work to the service of the Jewish people and God. I am proud of them and want to see their achievements recognized.

We've been rabbis at a time when the profession has changed dramatically, and we've been the agents of that change. The paradigm of rabbi as aloof scholar, shepherd and diplomat has been replaced, to a large degree, by other models. The rabbi has become more of a guide, a teacher who leads by example and can point people toward resources that will enable them to find their own solutions to life's dilemmas.

In what Rabbi Elie Kaunfer has aptly called an era of empowerment, Jews are not looking for simple answers, but engagement, direction, inspiration and the kind of encouragement that can propel a lifelong quest. They are looking less for a rabbi and more for a rebbe, in the original chasidic sense, a mentor who can take Judaism out of stuffy academies and let holiness breathe, sing and dance through the lives of real people.

Maybe the new title should reflect other honorifics given rabbis over the centuries, like "Mar" (Master) or "Rav" ("The Great One" — I like that, but I am not worthy). There's always "Shlita," an acronym for "May he live a long and good life, Amen" and "Nasi" (Prince or President).

Throughout the Middle Ages, you had really made it as a rabbi when you became known by your initials. Rambam (the acronym for the Hebrew letters reysh, mem, bet, mem) and Rashi (reysh, shin, yud) were the FDR and LBJ of their day. Maybe each of us should be

given an official nickname, whether it be our initials (mine would be “the RaYaMM — Rabbi Yehoshua ben Micha’el V’Miryam), or maybe something more folksy. The Talmud uses nicknames like “Honi the Circle Drawer.” Some of my classmates were also superb circle drawers as well, especially during Talmud class. How about “Reb Danny the Doodler?”

Finally, here’s an opportunity to introduce new fields of rabbinic specialization. As The Jewish Week’s new online Ethicist [1], maybe I should ask that my honorary doctorate be in the field of Menschology. Many of us could also claim expertise in Jewish Geography, Kiddush Gastronomy, Guilt Management and Mass Miscommunication.

So I gratefully accept my new title and will work hard to truly earn it. But the only degree I am really seeking is a degree of difficulty. With the month of Shavuot now in our rear-view mirror, mountainous challenges still await us, and even loftier opportunities. To scale those, American Jews don’t need doctors.

We need rabbis.

## **Mensch•Mark For Elul 23**

### **[To Determine Exactly what One Hears-Middah Mechavayn et Sh'muato](#)**

#### **Text**

"The one who understands his (her) lesson will not readily forget it." (Talmud *Yerushalmi: Berakot*, 5.1)

#### **Commentary**

Many translations of *Pirkei Avot* have been published and in each edition the translator has added his or her own nuances to its meaning.

Rabbi Susan Freeman, in her work *Teaching Jewish Virtues*, translates this *middah* as "being precise in transmitting what one has learned." Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, in *Chapters of the Fathers*, understands this *middah* as "he (or she) grasps and retains accurately what has been handed down to him (or her) by transmission." In the first translation, the individual is called upon to accurately transmit learning, in the second translation the individual is called upon to accurately understand and retain what has been transmitted. These two translations reflect the essence of Jewish learning and the transmission of Torah.

*Pirkei Avot* opens with the following teaching:

"Moses received the Torah at Sinai and conveyed it to Joshua; Joshua conveyed it to the Elders; the Elders conveyed it to the Prophets; and the Prophets conveyed it to the Men of the Great Assembly."

These individuals were our teachers and our leaders. They created the ongoing chain of Torah learning, passing Jewish learning and tradition from one generation to the next.

This is what makes Jewish learning a process and a product of thinking and acting. It is not simply a body of knowledge for an individual to absorb but a way of living both ethically and ritually. When we learn, the activity is more than mental gymnastics. Jewish learning engages our heart, our hands and our souls as well as our minds.

In this week's text the phrase reads, "The one who understands his (or her) lesson will not readily forget it." Clearly the rabbis of the Talmud knew that true learning comes when we go beyond mere memorization of information; true learning comes when we comprehend the meaning and message of what has been learned. We deepen our understanding and gain insights that will lead us to living lives imbued with Jewish values and ethics.

## **Mensch•Mark For Elul 24**

### **[Knowing One's Place-Middah Makir et Mekomo](#)**

## **Mensch•Mark For Elul 24**

### **[To Learn by Repetition-Middah Mishnah](#)**

## **Mensch•Mark For Elul 26**

### **[Limiting One's Involvement in Worldly Concerns-Middah Miyut Derech Eretz](#)**

## **Mensch•Mark For Elul 27**

### **[To Share the Burden with One's Friend-Middah Nosay B'ol Im Chavayro](#)**

## **Mensch•Mark For Elul 28**

### **[Love of Being Straightforward-Middah Ohev et HaMaysharim](#)**

**Mensch•Mark For Elul 29**

**[Trust in the Sages-Middah Emunat Chachamim](#)**

**Mensch•Mark For Tishrei 1**

**[Not Being Arrogant with One's Learning-Middah Lo Maygis Libo B'Talmudo](#)**

**Mensch•Mark For Tishrei 2**

**[Acceptance of Suffering-Middah Kabbalat HaYisurin](#)**

**Mensch•Mark For Tishrei 3**

**[Not Delighting in Rendering Decisions-Middah Eino Samayach BeHora'ah](#)**

**Mensch•Mark For Tishrei 4**

**[An Understanding of the Heart-Middah Binat HaLev](#)**

**Mensch•Mark For Tishrei 5**

**[Orderly Speech-Middah Arichat Sefatayim](#)**

**Mensch•Mark For Tishrei 6**

**[Asking and Answering-Middah Shoayl U'Mayshiv](#)**

**Mensch•Mark For Tishrei 7**

**[Quoting One's Sources-Middah Omer Davar BeShem Omro](#)**

**Mensch•Mark For Tishrei 8**

**[Beloved-Middah Ahuv](#)**

**Mensch•Mark For Tishrei 9**

**[Refrain from Taking Personal Credit for What is Good-Middah Eino Machazik Tova L'atzmo](#)**

**Mensch•Mark For Tishrei 10**

**[Slowness to Anger-Middah Erech Apayim](#)**

**Mensch•Mark For Tishrei 11**

**[Fear-Middah Ayma](#)**

**Mensch•Mark For Tishrei 12**

**[Studying in Order to Perform Mitzvot-Middah Lomed al Manat La'asot](#)**

**Mensch•Mark For Tishrei 13**

**[Good Heart-Middah Lev Tov](#)**

**Mensch•Mark For Tishrei 14**

**[Studying in Order to Teach-Middah Lomed al Manat Lelamed](#)**

**Mensch•Mark For Tishrei 15**

**[Guarding One's Speech-Middah Seyag LiD'varav](#)**

**Mensch•Mark For Tishrei 16**

**[The Study of Torah-Middah Talmud](#)**

**Mensch•Mark For Tishrei 17**

**[Happiness-Middah Simchah](#)**

**Mensch•Mark For Tishrei 18**

**To Attend to the Sages-Middah Shimush Chachamim**

**Mensch•Mark For Tishrei 19**

**Judging Others Favorably-Middah Machrio L'Chaf Zechut**