

TO LIVE WITH INTEGRITY

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For Tzvia

It was a beautiful Summer's afternoon at Fenway Park. Tzvia and Mieke and I were sitting some twenty rows up in the grandstand behind home plate. The sun was shining, the Red Sox were winning, and we were morose. It was Tzvia's birthday, and she had wanted the three of us to go a game. Usually it is just Tzvia and I, one of our favorite things to do together. Mieke was a good sport and agreed to come along. Tickets being hard to come by, Tzvia went on line and through Craig's List eventually found three tickets being sold at face-value, the only condition that we had set. Three tickets being harder to find than two or four, Tzvia was pleased, and we were impressed with her perseverance and her expertise. Late on Thursday night before the Sunday game, the man selling the tickets told Tzvia by cell phone that if we sent the money that night rather than in the morning he would take \$20.00 off the total price. It sounded good, so Mieke and Tzvia found the nearest Western Union office that was open and wired the money to "Louis." It was arranged that we would pick up the tickets at "Gate B" from "Chuck" on the day of the game.

Game day arrived. We left early in order to get there for batting practice, which Tzvia insists on. It's one thing to come to shul late, but not to a ball game. We made our way to "Gate B," starting to feel a little nervous, realizing that we didn't know if "Chuck" was a friend of "Louis" who would be meeting us, or if he worked for the Red Sox. We looked around and saw no one who seemed to be waiting with our tickets. We went to the ticket window and asked for "Chuck." The blank stare that met our query pulled a curtain across the sun-lit sky. We spoke to a manager, "no, there's no one who works here by that name, but why don't you go over to the main ticket office and ask them." So we did, and got the same answer, "no Chuck." "Are you able to do a search," we asked, "and see if there is a season ticket holder by the name of 'Louis' so and so?" They did, and there wasn't. We were the victims of a scam.

A sympathetic Red Sox official who had been trying to help us urged us to come with him and see if there might still be some tickets to buy. We gulped, and, trying to salvage

the day we paid twice what we had planned and made our way into the park. So much for batting practice, and sharing with Mieke our usual pre-game rituals. The sympathetic Red Sox official personally escorted us to our seats, restoring, as I said to him, some of our faith in people that day. It was the third inning when we finally sat down, depleted and ready to cry.

For some time we sat quietly, trying to put it all together. I put my arm around Tzvia, but said nothing. How do you explain such twisted behavior to a young person ready to go out into the world, bright and hopeful in her outlook? How do you explain the balance between trust and caution? In a world whose moral soil is so hospitable to cynicism, how to nurture optimism and hope? In a strange way I felt embarrassed that an adult would do this, hardly the worst thing adults do, in a world that I more often than not have presented to my children in terms of its good and its beauty. We were most concerned for Tzvia, that she still feel good with her efforts, as we were no less proud of her skills at searching and organizing. After a time, we spoke briefly, trying to find an opening into the excitement around us: "hey, we're at the game, let's enjoy it; no one was hurt, it's only money...." I reminded Tzvia of the times I had been conned over the years as a rabbi -- once causing great hurt to others in enlisting help for someone who had knocked on my door in apparent need. At the risk of revealing my own naivete, it never occurred to me that the ticket ad might be a scam.... It was only the next day that I noticed the warnings on Craig's List, "Avoid Scams and Fraud..., Beware Any Deal Involving Western Union..., or any other wire service - anyone who asks you to do so is a scammer." There it was. We called the number Tzvia had used previously, but it was no longer being answered. I thought about what I would say if I could speak with our scammer, so I wrote a letter:

Dear "Louis" (whether or not that is your real name),

I am the father of a young person whose name you may remember because it is unusual. My daughter's name is Tzvia, which means gazelle in Hebrew, a beautiful, gentle and graceful animal. Such is Tzvia. I don't know how old you are, but I can't imagine that you have children. If you did, I think it would be impossible for you to do what you have done, and I'm sure to many more people than Tzvia. I am far less angry about your stealing of our money than about the hurt and disillusion that you have caused her to feel.

I hope that you will keep reading my letter, through the writing of which I am trying to understand you and what makes you do what you do, as I hope you may gain even a glimmer of understanding, a moment of insight, into the pain you cause by deceiving people with your ticket scam. Tzvia loves baseball and in her innocence was easily led into your snare, trying to get Red Sox tickets for a game on her birthday. Please, if you would, take a moment and try to explain to me, and thereby to yourself, your thought

process, or perhaps non-thought process, that allows you to so deceive someone, anyone, but in this case, as you must have realized from all of those cell-phone calls, someone so clearly with the voice of a young person.

I am honestly trying to feel compassion for you, Louis. Is it pure self-interest and greed that motivates you? Are you so bitter and jaded about life and the world and people that your only goal is to get what you want in the easiest possible way, without regard for anyone else? If that is it, and you can be so honest with yourself, are you able to recognize at all the tangled path from the innocence of your own childhood to the person you have become? Are you aware of ever having loved and been loved? Are there people whose pain you would feel if what you have done to Tzvia was done to them? To love is to feel the pain and the joy of others. If you are deadened to such feeling, I am sorry for you, and frightened by what can happen when people are so cut off from awareness of themselves in relation to others. If your need for quick money, such as that sent by late night wire, is for drugs that you have made your body think it needs, I pray for you. I pray that you stop hurting yourself and others. I pray that one morning you will wake up, Louis, and find yourself looking into the trusting eyes of a child.

With compassionate anger,
Tzvia's father, Victor

The questions that I would ask of Louis are the questions to be asked of so many people today, people who have committed far more serious crimes than Louis. Perhaps that is in part what hurt so much in experiencing our own relatively small-scale scam. It seemed to bring home all of the pain born of falsehood and deceit that is so rife in the worlds around us today. What would I write to Bernard Madoff, before whose victims our loss and its hurt pales? Here we struggle on yet another level as well. How does a Jew do this, and primarily to other Jews? And quickly comes the nausea, is there any less deceit among our own than in the wider world? As to whom the victims, a fascinating statement by Rabbenu Bachya from 13th century Spain in regard to stealing from non-Jews: "it is more serious than stealing from a Jew because it desecrates God's name - 'מפני חלול ה'." Rabbenu Bachya is speaking from a place of embarrassment that is perhaps what we also feel when Jews commit public crimes and indecencies. How sickening the sight of the rabbis in New Jersey being led away, their's a truly large-scale scam and fraud. And the rabbi father of the informant in the case, disowning his son not for the crimes that he too committed, but for informing on other Jews who had committed crimes. How could these people have davened three times a day, standing before the ark in their synagogues above which was undoubtedly written the traditional phrase, דע לפני מי אתה עומד - "Know before Whom you stand." What causes so profound a disconnect?

Against such a backdrop of desecration, the words of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch from 19th century Germany seem almost quaint, a poignant paean to the moral beauty of what the idealized Jew should be. In regard to business ethics as expressed in the Torah's commandment to use just weights and measures, "You shall have perfect stone weights and just ones, a perfect measure and a just one," Hirsch writes: "the Jewish person becomes an abomination to God..., if he calls himself a Jew but fails to observe most scrupulously the laws of honesty in human relationships."

The collective acknowledgment of sin in our saying of the *על חטא* today takes on particular urgency this year. We say a litany of sins in the plural, no one person could possibly have done them all, but out there, among our people, they have occurred and we are all responsible for repairing the damage done to ourselves and to our world, for the desecration of God's name. *על חטא שחטנו לפניך בַּכָּזֵב וּבַחֲשֵׁב* - "We have sinned against You by fraud and by falsehood." Meaning "lie," "deceit," the word *כָּזֵב* in another form, *כָּחַשׁ*, means "to deny someone's existence." That is the beginning and the end of deceit and fraud, and its greatest tragedy, there is no one else, there is no "Thou," only an all encompassing "I."

Responding to a world of lies, the Kotzker Rebbe is said to have shouted, *די וועלט שטענאקט*. One doesn't need much Yiddish to hear the cynicism and despair of the Kotzker. He was a hard-bitten Rebbe, supremely demanding of himself and of his Chassidim. His banner was *אמת* / Truth. He could not abide shallowness or falsehood in the world around him, whatever the shade or degree. For the last twenty years of his life he withdrew from the world and from human interaction, closing himself in his room surrounded by the unchallenged truth of solitude. In the Kotzker's retreat from falsehood is the tragic irony of his life, for truth, and one's ability to respond to its challenge, can only be known among people.

There are times when we all feel like withdrawing from the world. One of our great and holy challenges is to transform and transcend cynicism and despair, and the blasphemy of even the Kotzker Rebbe. The world doesn't stink! It is the foul air, the pollution, that rises from misdirected human ingenuity, sometimes literally and sometimes figuratively that stinks, shrouding beauty from our eyes and hearts. How could the Kotzker say *די וועלט שטענאקט* and praise God every day for the continuous renewal of Creation, exclaiming, *מה רבו מעשיך ה'* / "How great are Your works, O God?"

In a fascinating midrash, the rabbis imagine God vacillating as to whether to create people or not as part of Creation. Unencumbered, with a beautiful world to enjoy, will the heartache and *tzoris* of children be worth it? Fortunately for us, God, through the

imaginings of the rabbis, takes a very different view of human reality than the Kotzker:

At the hour when the Holy Blessed One came to create the first human, the ministering angels formed themselves into groups and fellowships, some of them saying, "let the human be created," while others were saying, "let the human not be created." חסד/Kindness said, "let the human be created, for the human will do acts of loving kindness;" And אמת/Truth said, "let the human not be created, for the human is made entirely of lies;" צדק/Justice said, "let the human be created, for the human will do just and righteous deeds;" שלום/Peace said, "let the human not be created, for the human will be all strife." What did the Holy Blessed One do? God took Truth - וְהַשְׁלִיכָהּ לָאָרֶץ - and cast it to the earth....

It is a powerful teaching that acknowledges human frailty, declaring our worthiness to be created in spite of the shortcomings that God knows will be part of our nature. God is wary of the impossible demands of absolute truth, wary of the harsh teaching of the Kotzker. The midrash affirms our humanity in spite of our frailty. When the angels protest God's action, God responds that "truth will rise up from the earth," drawing then for proof from תהילים/Psalms, "Truth will spring from the earth," אמת מארץ תצמח. It is a profound expression of optimism, it will be for people, for us, to raise truth back up to God, imperfect, coated with the dust of this earth.

I share one more strand to this intricate midrash. It is but one sentence, what appears to be an entirely separate thought that is woven into the midst of the teaching about truth, breaking its continuity, in fact. Offered through the names of a string of rabbis, a word play is made: 'מאד' הוא 'אדם' -- "the word 'מאד'/'very,' is 'אדם'/'human.'" The rabbis see an intrinsic connection between the two words, 'very' and 'human,' formed of the same letters in Hebrew. By flipping the first letter, 'מ' of 'מאד,' the word 'אדם'/'human' is formed. The rabbis draw then on God's expression of delight upon the creation of people at the very end of Creation, "And God saw all that God had made, and behold, it was very good -- והנה טוב מאד." Just in case the midrash about truth was too cryptic in its affirmation of people, the rabbis now boldly change God's own words as expressed in the Torah, והנה טוב אדם -- "and behold, the human is good!" How very human we are, and in God's eyes, for all of our frailty, how good.

On the day after the ticket scam, when I looked at Craig's List and noticed the warning that now fairly shouted, "Avoid Scams and Fraud..., Beware Any Deal Involving...", my mind stopped before reading the words "Western Union," and cynically substituted the word 'people.' I winced, "beware any deal involving people," how could I say that? Is that the message that I want Tzvia to come away with from our unfortunate experience, don't trust people?

It is not the message that I want to give to my children, nor the message that I want to

live by. The message that we live by is the message that we give to our children and convey to the world. In all of its facets, the message of our lives will in the end be either one of hope and possibility or of defeat and despair. Not to trust is to be alone, to withdraw, like the Kotzker, from the flawed and beautiful world of human interaction. For all the pain of trust violated, aware to be cautious and careful, there is no other way but to trust if we would choose life. "Life is with people." The Prophet Micah taught us the way: *It has been told to you, O, human, what is good and what God seeks of you, הגיד לך מך דורש ממה ה' טוב ומה ה' דורש מך*, *only to do justly, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.* To wake in the morning and heed God's gentle call to live with integrity is the way of response that will overcome the harsh and the seamy. That which we have most control over is our own integrity, and that is everything, what we live by, what we take with us, and what we leave behind.

A ברכה, a blessing that I pray we have little need to say in context, but whose meaning is larger than the context of its usual saying.... Upon hearing of a death (ר"ל - God forbid), or in fuller form at the time of the tearing at a funeral, tearfully uttered, perhaps shouted in cathartic cry -- ברוך דיין האמת / Blessed is the Judge of Truth. Understood as an expression of resignation, as it often is, of accepting God's will, it can leave us cold and alone. Understood as blessing God Who understands the nature of human striving after truth, imperfect yet good, it can be comforting. At the moment of coming face to face with life's surest truth, with the saying of a blessing we acknowledge God's overarching truth that is larger than one life, the human is good. We are embraced by God's eternal presence; we are not alone or forgotten in our shortcomings. ברוך דיין האמת -- more than a blessing of closure and summation, it is a blessing of commitment for the living to live with integrity, truthfully, before God and people. Our deeds as 'amen' to their lives, so shall the memory of dear ones we remember now during Yizkor remain true in our lives as a blessing.