

B'nai Mtizvah Drash
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Beth Chayim Chadashim, Los Angeles

Shabbat Shalom.

In a few short weeks, Jews everywhere will be finishing a cycle of Torah Study and preparing to begin anew with Genesis. For me, this will mean the completion of my third consecutive cycle of Torah Study. I am very fortunate to have the time to participate – somewhat regularly - in three Torah Study groups. Two great ones here at BCC – on Thursday nights with Rabbi Lisa and the phone minyan with Bracha as leader. I am also privileged to study with an amazing group of women in Temple Isaiah's Women's group. (I am deeply touched that many of the members of that group are here tonight.) The three groups are all very wonderful and all very different.

But no matter which group I'm with, when it comes to Torah Study, I am always struck by the same realization. That is that studying Torah – especially in a group – provides an amazing mirror into the mind and into the soul. What I mean by this is that when I peer into text of Torah with others, I often see reflected back at me insights into my own mind, heart, and soul. And sometimes these insights are really quite surprising. It's like Torah is the Ultimate Rorschach Test. I'll talk more on what I saw in this week's portion in a minute. For now, it's enough to say that it had to do with pursuing balance. That balance is the theme is not very surprising because the pursuit of balance – whether physical, emotional, or spiritual – has been a primary theme in my life for about five years now.

In fact, the pursuit of balance has quite naturally brought me to explore the Jewish Mussar movement. Mussar is usually translated as Jewish Ethics. But I find that a terrible inadequate definition. In many ways, Mussar appears to be the foundation of what would later develop into the field of psychology. Centuries before Freud had his couch and was peering into the hidden regions of the human mind, Mussar sages were peering into the hidden regions of the human soul. Now the mind and the soul are not one in the same. But they are intricately related. What I find fascinating is that the treatments for 'diseases of the soul' described by the Mussar Sages and those used to treat 'disorders of the mind' in psychology are very similar.

One of the primary areas of focus in Mussar is – Balance. The Mussar Sages acknowledge and readily accept that every person has within them every possible personality trait – or as they put it 'Soul-Trait'. They also say that no trait – in and of itself – is bad. Whatever the trait - love, anger, compassion, jealousy, whatever – it only becomes bad when it is out of balance. For instance, Anger, in certain situations is necessary. It only becomes a bad trait when it is not balanced by compassion and restraint. Likewise, seemingly 'good' traits such as love or compassion can become destructive when out of balance. If you have ever known someone in an obsessive love relationship, you know what I mean.

So back to this weeks portion – Ki Titzeh., and the pursuit of balance. First I should let you know that I had not intended to delve deeply into this week's portion. My only interest this week was to learn to chant it so as to not embarrass myself. That was it. But it's like when you're running to the gym and look briefly in the mirror – basically out of habit – with no intention of really looking at what's there. And then you see a big splash of food or gash of ink across you face. You may have intended to not pay much attention, but now you have to stop and do something about it.

That is how it was for me and this portion. I wanted to glance briefly and instead saw something I had to pay attention to. What I saw reflected was the need to pay attention to balance in giving and taking. In earlier parashot we learn that we are required to leave part of our fields and vineyards so that those who are in need can be fed. From this our Sages gleaned the mitzvah of giving Tzedakah. Two of the verses that I will be chanting later have to do – not with giving but - with taking from those fields and vineyards. To paraphrase, it says that you may eat to you fill in you neighbors field but you must not cut extra or fill containers from these fields. Essentially, taking is ok. But there are limits.

This made me think about Giving and Taking in my own life. You see giving comes relatively easily to me. Whether it is my time, my resources, or of myself, giving is one of the more natural things I do. Not so for taking. Or maybe receiving is a better word. For me, receiving is often awkward and uncomfortable, sometimes to the point of being painful. Because of this, taking is something I sometimes try to avoid. But as I glanced into this portion, I was struck by the realization that: To give without receiving is as out of balance as it is to take without giving. So I thought, Oh Great! Just what I need! Something else to work on!

But it is great. And I am grateful for the mirror. One of the truly great Mussar Sages – Rabbi Yisrael Salanter – said ‘As long as one lives a life of calmness and tranquility in the service of God, it is clear that he is remote from true service.’ The teaching I got along with this quote basically said that a completely tranquil life - a life without challenges or things to work on - is like living in a coma. Because without challenge there is no growth, just stagnation. And who wants to live life as if asleep?

So I am going to end my comments tonight with an invitation. If you’ve grown a bit complacent, if you feel you’re cat napping a bit though life instead of living it vibrantly, I invite you to try a cycle of Torah study. It can be an amazing mirror, and what you see reflected may just be both surprising and exciting. It has been for me.

Shabbat Shalom.