

Content People and Container People

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So, a guy goes into a job interview and the human resource director asks, “What do you feel is your greatest weakness?” The candidate says, “honesty.” “Well, I don’t think honesty should be considered a weakness,” replies the surprised HR guy. The candidate looks at him for a moment and says, “I don’t give a crap what you think.” Honesty and integrity are related, of course, but as the guy seeking a job must have learned the hard way, they are not quite the same thing.

Some of you may know I gave a somewhat provocative sermon on Day 2 of Rosh Hashanah. I spoke about honesty, lies and how Trumpism grew out our rampant culture of BS. (By the way, that’s a technical term, so if you didn’t hear the sermon, you can [watch the recording](#) and catch up). And I hinted that on Yom Kippur I plan to move from discussing Trump-style sincerity – which essentially means expressing whatever you feel, whenever you feel it, to as many people who will listen – to talking about something more adult and more aspirational. Tonight, I want to discuss a character trait which I feel is profoundly lacking, but desperately needed, in American leadership – which is integrity.

The recent kerfuffle between Trump and the NFL about the national anthem is a case in point. Raise your hand if you think of yourself as an optimist. How about a pessimist? What’s the expression we use? Is the glass “half empty” or “half full?” But, there’s another binary having to do with glasses: Are you a content person or a container person? There are people who focus on the water, the substance held within the glass. Those who support players taking a knee during the anthem are *content* people. What does the Star Spangled Banner mean? How about the flag? If the country represented by these symbols isn’t living up to the ideals they embody, then perhaps we shouldn’t venerate them? Or even if we do, maybe those who don’t should be heard?

Others are *container* people: to them, the symbols themselves have intrinsic value: the flag and anthem should be respected because they embody our national pride and heritage. To these people, having strong symbols helps to inspire a nation. And allegiance to these symbols, perhaps especially when we’re feeling ambivalent about our patriotism, helps to shape our collective American consciousness and focus our minds on these ideals. You might have guessed, I’m more of a contents person, but I want to be careful not to disregard the container too quickly. After all, there is no glass of water without a glass.

The Rabbis, too, grapple with the importance of contents and containers. The Gemara (*Ta’anit* 7a-b) tells of the Caesar’s daughter who approached Rabbi Yehoshua ben Hananiya and asked how his wisdom could be contained in such an ugly vessel (Rabbi Yehoshua was well-known for his, let’s say, unappealing looks). Rabbi Yehoshua pointed out to her that the most expensive wine in the Caesar’s house was kept in pottery – why not in gold and silver vessels? Taking his suggestion seriously, she ordered all of the wine to be transferred to gold and silver. And, of course, after a short time the wine had spoiled.

We know the expression: “Don’t judge a book by its cover.” You have to read the book, you have to get to know the person, to assess his or her worth. As the story suggests, when we prioritize too much a beautiful container, it can even have a corrosive effect. The person viewed in this way becomes objectified, defined by her or his vessel, which over time can spoil the contents.

But I think there’s something more to this Talmudic story. There are those, like Donald Trump, who seem incapable of appreciating anything but the container, but Jewish tradition doesn’t shun those who notice and celebrate beauty. Keats’ assessment that “beauty is truth and truth beauty,” doesn’t suffice for us as it did for the Greeks, but taking note of beauty is no vice! Did you know there’s a *beracha* for seeing a strikingly beautiful person? “*sh’kacha lo b’olamo*, Thank you God for bringing such splendor into the world.” But there’s also a *beracha* when we see a person who looks like Rabbi Yehoshua – *m’shaneh hab’riot*, for varying the creative enterprise. There’s nothing intrinsically good or bad about silver or earthenware vessels. It’s about the relationship between the container and contents. Perhaps the Talmud is trying to teach us less about physical beauty per se and more about the correlation between the part of us people see and that other part.

I read a couple wonderful books this summer. One is a novel called *Gilead* by Marilynne Robinson. The other a memoir by Haroon Moghul called *How to be a Muslim*. Moghul is an American of Pakistani heritage and, as a student at NYU, helped build the Islamic Center there into a vibrant student organization, one that became a model for centers like it around the country. After 9.11, as a young man, he became a go-to commentator on cable news channels as the country attempted to better understand the nature of a religion, 19 of whose purported adherents, had just committed the most horrific terrorist attack in US history. So, it’s about Haroon’s public persona, his speaking engagements, his meteoric rise, his container, if you will. But it’s also about his private life, and mostly the disconnect between the two. You see, even as Haroon was shining as an Islamic scholar and spokesman, beneath his charming personality and sense of humor, was a man deeply ashamed, struggling with depression and even suicidal. His inner life was riddled with doubt – about God, himself, his purpose, even as the container he presented to the world glistened and gleamed.

Gilead is also a book about a faith leader, in this case an aging preacher in mid-century Iowa who reflects on his life’s work in a series of missives to his young child whom he will not witness grow into adulthood. The Pulitzer Prize winning novel is beautifully rendered and, like *How to be a Muslim* is all about the tension between the internal and external life. In one epistle, the Reverend John Aimes struggles with his stacks of handwritten sermons, a lifetime of messages to his congregation, and whether he ought to burn them. He wonders if most of them mattered. And he, like the non-fictional Haroon Moghul, grapples with his own religious practice, his desire for material gratification and his occasional shame at not being able to fully integrate his inner and outer life.

The word integrate is etymologically related to the word integrity. What is integrity? I understand it to mean leading a coherent life, striving and, as often as possible, succeeding to unite, in the most constructive way, our inner and outer beings, our contents and our container. There’s a Hebrew phrase to describe such coherence: *tocho k’varo*, literally “his insides match

his outsides.” Surprisingly, though, the expression enters the lexicon in a Talmudic tale (*Berachot* 28a), on the lips of the story’s antagonist. A brief summary: Rabban Gamliel is the Patriarch in the 1st century, a leader by virtue of his aristocratic lineage. And he’s the imperious sort; he doesn’t like being challenged. Along comes a particular student who doesn’t like his answer to a certain question and cites the alternative position of our old friend Rabbi Yehoshua ben Hananiya. So Rabban Gamliel makes Rabbi Yehoshua stand in the beit midrash, in front of his students, as he berates him for daring to interpret *halacha* the way he does. Mortified by this public shaming of an icon, the Rabbis depose Rabban Gamliel and replace him with another guy named Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah. And Eleazar’s first executive order is to bring hundreds of benches into the beit midrash to accommodate all the new students. So, was Rabbi Eleazar a better teacher than Rabban Gamliel? No. Why, then, did so many new people come to the study hall? Because Rabban Gamliel had guards stationed at the door barring most students from entering. The thirst for learning was there, but his policy was only to teach those whose “insides matched their outsides,” *tocho k’varo!*

Which policy was right? The Talmud is ambiguous. On one hand Rabbi Yehoshua and Rabbi Eleazar are the clear protagonists in the story. And their policies are more inclusive. But then Rabban Gamliel, considering that perhaps he had, tragically, withheld torah from worthy recipients, has a strange dream in which he sees “white pitchers filled with ash.” Wait a second! Maybe he was right. Maybe these new students were a bunch of pretty containers with ashen contents. The sugiyah isn’t clear. It’s possible, says the Gemara, this vision came only to placate Rabban Gamliel, to ease his mind. And, in fairness, we’re told on that day in the beit midrash, they managed to solve all kinds of previously insoluble problems. Maybe the more inclusive approach is the better one. But, on the other hand, isn’t there value to having an admissions policy, surely for ability but perhaps also for integrity? Shouldn’t the leaders of tomorrow be people who are coherent beings, whose containers match their contents?

What’s going on here? Who’s right? Who’s wrong? The answer, as is so often the case, is not so clear. I want to suggest that Rabban Gamliel’s failing here isn’t really his policy, isn’t necessarily his expectation of others, it’s his inability to recognize his own failings. He speaks the right words: “*tocho k’varo,*” but his actions, his behaviors don’t reflect that value. He embarrasses a colleague. He eschews dissenting opinions. He intimidates opponents. Later in the story, he visits Rabbi Yehoshua’s home to apologize and, seeing soot on his colleague’s walls, uncouthly remarks, “I didn’t know you were a smith!” He’s so sheltered, so bound up in his own largess, it doesn’t occur to him that not all learned men are independently wealthy, that many of them have to work in menial jobs to make ends meet. Rabban Gamliel talks the talk of integrity but he lives a life of containers, ignoring the contents. He’s a failed leader because he fails to lead by example.

We so need leaders with integrity right now, not just ones with good talking points, but people who walk the walk. People like Haroon Moghul, who aren’t afraid to be vulnerable, who confess at struggling to achieve a coherent life, but try and try again to get it right. Instead, as Donald Trump attempts with each rally, with each hateful tweet, to fill an unfillable void, the maelstrom that swirls where his conscience should be, we are drawn repeatedly into that vortex. There is collateral damage close to the eye of a storm.

TS Elliot writes:

*We are the hollow men
We are the stuffed men
Leaning together
Headpiece filled with straw. Alas!
Our dried voices, when
We whisper together
Are quiet and meaningless
As wind in dry grass
Or rats' feet over broken glass
In our dry cellar...*

And later in the poem:

*Between the idea
And the reality
Between the motion
And the act
Falls the Shadow*

Binaries like these can remind us: to be human is to strive for integration, for integrity. The shadow is what happens when we fall short. And T.S. Elliot's notorious antisemitism is, perhaps, a reminder how difficult such coherence is to achieve.

"The Hollow Men" concludes, "This is the way the world ends. Not with a bang, but a whimper." I wish I knew what will happen with North Korea; God willing cooler heads will prevail. But if I'm honest with myself, my greatest fear isn't the bang, it's the whimper. It's the gradual erosion of norms, values and virtues democracies like ours used to hold dear. The integrity of a free press cherished and celebrated in a free society. The sanctity of the right to vote. The importance of empirical facts and the heroes who, through research, subject them to rigorous scientific scrutiny. The imperative to do justice for all Americans. Folks, if the vessels that hold our society cannot breathe, the wine will spoil.

Tomorrow, I'll do my best to make sense of the rise of White Nationalism and the ways our president's failure of leadership has emboldened hateful and hollow groups of men. But, even as we contemplate the incongruity of civic life, we must not forget the importance of our own, personal growth. Indeed, it is all the more important right now to be the best versions of ourselves as possible. Because the world needs more people of integrity, who are *tocho k'varo*, whose insides and outsides are better aligned.

And the Mahzor offers us a yardstick against which we can measure our own coherence. Think about *Unetaneh Tokef*. Tomorrow, during Musaf, we'll hear the haunting melody to accompany the words: "You open the book of remembrance and it reads itself.... The great shofar is sounded and a still small voice is heard... *Hinei Yom Hadin*, the Day of Judgment is here!" I've said before, the lesson of this hymn isn't about a coercive God, or a punitive one. It's about intimacy. There a standard to which we must hold ourselves, and a Force in the universe that calls us to

account. The content of our souls, the Godliness within beckons to us, asking us, pleading with us to better unite our internal and external lives. Let's make a pledge to ourselves. That in this coming year, anytime we feel disequilibrium that leads us to behave in disappointing ways, we'll take note and pivot away from that behavior. When we experience discord that leaves us hollow, empty inside, we'll strive to find healthy influences, experiences and relationships to fill us up.

And let's not forget that we are embodied creatures, that we are physical beings. Traditionally we say a blessing each morning for our bodies and another for our souls. The vessels that contain us are an integral part of us. The Biblical word for a person is *nefesh*, an ensouled-body. To be a healthy human is to integrate content and container, finding the sweet spot between both our private and public selves and our physical and spiritual existence.