

“A Little Cheating”

דבר תורה (sermon) for Rosh Hashanah Day 2 5777/2016

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Two Jews came to a Chassidic rabbi to ask advice about sins they had committed. One had committed a great sin for which he was sure God would never forgive him; the other was less worried, because he had never been guilty of anything so grave, but only of the normal collection of lesser sins.

The rabbi told them to go out to a field and select stones corresponding to the size and number of their sins, and later to return to the field and scatter the stones. This done, they came back to the rabbi. “Now go to the field once more,” he told them both, “pick up the stones you scattered, and bring them to me.”

He who had committed the one big sin knew at once which was his stone, and brought it to the rabbi. The other, however, had scattered so many little stones that he could not be certain of identifying them again. He had a most difficult time in finding his stones and bringing them to the rabbi.

The rabbi then told them: “Your deeds are like your stones. You who brought one large stone, committed a grave sin. But you were conscious of what you had done, and with a determined effort at repentance you could be forgiven by God. But you, whose sins were many and small, like those of most human beings, have found how hard it is to catch up with one’s minor lapses. And no repentance of yours can possibly be effective until you realise that small things matter.”¹

This beautiful story is sensitive to two important points – first, that people are comfortable with small sins, and second, that they should not be. I’d like to explore these ideas in the context of a sin that, I dare say, each of us perpetrates to a certain degree, the sin of dishonesty. In general, I hope, we all consider ourselves to be fairly honest people. But think about it for a moment . . . how often do you do something that is, at least, somewhat dishonest. When was the last time you cheated just a little bit? When was the last time you told a lie?

¹ <http://www.oztorah.com/2013/09/penitence-prayer-charity-an-anthology-for-rosh-hashanah-yom-kippur/> (this webpage reproduces a “compilation by Rabbi Raymond Apple” which “originally appeared in booklet form as Penitence, Prayer & Charity: An Anthology for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, published by the Publications Committee of the United Synagogue, London, 1970 (and subsequently republished by the Great Synagogue, Sydney).”

Behavioral economist Dan Ariely researches the psychology and economics of cheating.² He has done some very fascinating experiments on the subject. Many of his experiments revolve around giving people an opportunity to cheat and observing their choices. For instance, he will have a group of people take a test with 20 math problems, simple enough that everyone could get all the questions right if they had the time, but he gives them too little time to complete the task. The people are told that they will get a certain amount of money per question they get right, and they are told to put their exams in a shredder and self-report how many questions they got correct. What they don't know is that in fact the shredder was only shredding the margins of the paper so that the experimenter could later find out how people really did.

In his experiments, the average subject got 4 questions right. How many questions do you think the average person would say he or she got right? Do you think it depended on how much money was involved? The experiment was run offering a range from 10 cents to 10 dollars per correct answer, but that didn't change the result. Nor did it matter if Ariely changed the experiment a bit to make the subjects feel it was more or less likely that they would get caught, but that didn't matter either.

As I mentioned, the average subject got 4 questions right. The subjects, on the other hand, reported that they got an average of 6 questions right. The vast majority of people cheated but only a little bit, and very few people cheated a lot. This, of course, seems counterintuitive. If you are going to cheat, if you are going to compromise your commitment to honesty, why not make it worth your while? Why not cheat more if there is more money on the table? Why not cheat more if you can be more certain that you won't get caught? Ariely explains:

At one hand, we all want to look at ourselves in the mirror and feel good about ourselves, so we don't want to cheat. On the other hand, we can cheat a little bit, and still feel good about ourselves.³

So, while people couldn't continue to feel good about themselves if they said they got 20 questions right, they can still feel good about themselves if they cheat a little bit. Ariely calls this the “personal fudge factor.”⁴

You might think that as long as we stay away from gigantic cheating we'll all be OK – that the big problems in this world stem from people who are willing to cheat on a gargantuan scale. But Ariely points out that his research finds that there are very few big cheaters but that given the interconnected nature of the global economy, a lot of small cheating can combine to have very significant economic impact. For instance, Ariely has run experiments like the one I have described on some 35,000 subjects throughout the world and during those experiments experienced 20 big cheaters who took him for around \$250. On the other hand, he found 25,000 small cheaters who took him for \$50,000. Small cheating really adds up.

Jewish ethical teachings also agree that small sins are nothing to get comfortable with. In פרקי אבות (Pirkei Avot, *Ethics of the Fathers*), Rabbi Judah the Prince teaches that we should not presume to know the impact of our mitzvot and sins:

² For more information on Dan Ariely see e.g. https://www.ted.com/speakers/dan_ariely. The information in this sermon is largely based on his TED talk titled, “Our buggy moral code” as well as a more lengthy talk on the same subject accessible at <https://youtu.be/G2RKQkAoY3k>.

³ Transcript of Ariely TED Talk https://www.ted.com/talks/dan_ariely_on_our_buggy_moral_code/transcript?language=en at 6:46.

⁴ Id.

Be careful with a light mitzvah as with a weighty one, for you do not know the reward of mitzvah. And consider the loss from performing a mitzvah against its reward, and the reward of a sin against its costs.⁵

והוי זהיר במצוה קלה כבחמורה שאין אתה יודע מתן שכרן של מצות והוי מחשב הפסד מצוה כנגד שכרה ושכר עבירה כנגד הפסדה.⁵

What's more, a sin is not an isolated incident:

Ben Azai says: Run toward a light mitzvah as you would toward a weighty one, and flee from sin, for one mitzvah begets another, and one sin begets another – because the reward of a mitzvah is a mitzvah and the reward of a sin is a sin.⁶

בן עזאי אומר הוי רץ למצוה קלה כבחמורה ובורח מן העבירה שמצוה גוררת מצוה ועבירה גוררת עבירה ששכר מצוה מצוה ושכר עבירה עבירה.⁶

Ben Azai teaches further in Avoth D'Rabbi Nathan:

Recoil from a light sin so that you will recoil from a weighty sin. . . . If the opportunity to sin comes to your hands, do not worry about that sin, but about the sin that comes after it.⁷

הוי נרתע מחטא הקל כדי שתרתע מחטא חמור. אם באת עבירה לידך [אל תדאג מאותה עבירה אלא מן הבאה אחריה].⁷

He also teaches:

If the opportunity to do a mitzvah comes to your hands, do not be happy about that mitzvah, but about the mitzvah that comes after it.⁸

ואם באת מצוה לידך אל תשמח לאותה מצוה אלא לבאה אחריה.⁸

I would argue this is true on a psychological level. The more we do something wrong the more it becomes second nature so that we hardly even think about it and we become far less likely to even consider whether the act is wrong.

⁵ Avoth 2:1.

⁶ Avoth 4:2.

⁷ Avoth D'Rabbi Nathan Text B Chapter 33.

⁸ Id.

What's worse, the sins we commit can become a model for those around us and can cause them to sin as well. Professor Ariely has a fascinating variation on his experiment that helps demonstrate this. In this variation, he gives everyone \$20 for the 20 questions and tells them that they will have to return a dollar for each question they cannot complete. During the exam, at a point where no one could possibly have finished, one “subject,” an actor, gets up and declares that he has solved all the problems. The experimenter allows the “subject” to leave with his \$20. He is clearly cheating. Did the fact that he cheated – and got away with it – change the cheating behavior of the others? The answer is that it depended. Ariely ran the experiment at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh. Sometimes, he had the actor wear a Carnegie Mellon sweatshirt. When he did, cheating behavior increased. But when the actor wore a University of Pittsburgh sweatshirt, cheating decreased! Ariely explains that, “If somebody from our in-group cheats and we see them cheating, we feel it's more appropriate, as a group, to behave this way.”⁹

So, what do we do about all this? We spoke yesterday about giving reproof to our friends and loved ones when we believe they have done something wrong. How important is this point in light of how our feelings of group belonging have a strong influence on our behavior. What kind of culture would we help to create if we talked to those around us about the importance of honesty and the dangers of even “small cheating?” What if we confronted someone we cared about if we found out that that person was downloading music without paying for it, or borrowing a friend's Netflix account, or lying about a child's age to get the kid's admission price to the movie? What if parents and grandparents were to teach their children and grandchildren, through their actions, that cheating – even at small levels - is still a form of stealing and unacceptable? How might a child's behavior be different in the future – even into adulthood - if his or her parent said, “I'm sure we could tell the cashier that you are under 13, but it's worth the \$2 to be honest and the world would be much richer if we didn't all try to steal from each other \$2 at a time.”

Professor Ariely's studies provide a final very important observation about how to achieve greater honesty. He talks about moral awareness – the importance of being actively aware of our morality. In some versions of his experiment, he asks the subjects to recall the Ten Commandments and then had them do the math problems. Cheating disappears. The moral “fudge factor” that he spoke about is gone. Having recently been made actively aware of moral expectations, the subjects can not justify “just a little bit of cheating” while still feeling good about themselves.

I want to close with one very important observation Professor Ariely makes: It doesn't matter how “religious” you are – not that I pretend for a moment to be able to tell how religious any given person is. But Ariely notes that cheating behavior stopped among test subjects regardless of how many commandments the person was able to recall, which he took as a vague indicator of how religious the subject was – an exercise that inspired moral awareness effectively eliminated cheating behavior in everyone. And, by the way, this type of thing worked even with self-declared atheists, who were found not to cheat after they were asked to swear on the Bible. In one particularly entertaining example, MIT students didn't cheat at all after they were asked to sign a statement saying, “I understand that this short survey falls under the MIT Honor Code,” which is particularly ironic seeing as how MIT doesn't *even have* an honor code.

⁹ Transcript of Ariely TED Talk
https://www.ted.com/talks/dan_ariely_on_our_buggy_moral_code/transcript?language=en at 12:01.

I mention this last point because I think it is most important. Oftentimes I speak to people who tell me “I’m not that religious a person,” as if to give him or herself an excuse for not trying to do a little bit more religiously. They seem to be saying, “well, if I don’t observe all of the laws, what difference would it make if I started doing any one particular thing” or “since I am not as strongly religious as you, what difference would my doing a mitzvah make?” My answer, based on Professor Ariely’s studies, is that no matter where you are on the religious spectrum, whether you are the most religiously observant person around or if on average the High Holidays are the only time you so much as think about God, anything you choose to do that makes you more aware of yourself and your responsibilities can make a world of difference.

In the Shema we read:

And these words that I command you shall be on your heart. You shall teach them to your children and speak of them when you dwell in your house and when you go on your way, when you lie down and when you rise up.¹⁰

וְהָיוּ הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה אֲשֶׁר אֶנְכִי מְצַוֶּה הַיּוֹם עָלֶיךָ לְבָבְךָ: וְשִׁנְנֵתָם לְבְנֶיךָ וְדַבַּרְתָּ בָם בְּשִׁבְתְּךָ בְּבֵיתְךָ וּבְלַכְתְּךָ בַדֶּרֶךְ וּבְשֹׁכְבְךָ וּבְקוּמְךָ:¹⁰

The point is clear: vigilant awareness of God is an inspiration to good. And so, I ask everyone here to think about Ariely’s message of moral awareness. Choose a mitzvah that you can do on a regular basis – perhaps Sabbath candles on Friday night, perhaps daily recitation of the *Shema* or the Amidah, regular study of Torah or recitation of blessings before and after eating food. Find something that you can add to your religious repertoire and routine that will help you increase your moral awareness and reinforce your commitment to moral behavior.

In the Torah portion of today, God asks Abraham to sacrifice his son. Fortunately, as the prophet Micah reminds us, God asks nothing of the sort from us:

Does the LORD desire thousands of rams, myriad streams of oil? Should I give my first born for my sins, the fruit of my belly for my soul? Oh human, He has told you what is good and what the LORD asks of you, just to do justice and love righteousness, and walk humbly with your God.¹¹

הֲיִרְצֶה ה' בְּאַלְפֵי אֵילִים בְּרִבְבוֹת נְחֹלֵי שָׁמֶן הָאֶתֶן בְּכוֹרֵי פִשְׁעֵי פְרִי בְטְנִי חַטָּאת נַפְשִׁי: הֲגִיד לְךָ אָדָם מָה טוֹב וּמָה ה' דּוֹרֵשׁ מִמֶּנּוּ כִּי אִם עֲשׂוֹת מִשְׁפָּט וְאַהֲבַת חֶסֶד וְהִצְנַע לֶכֶת עִם אֱ-לֹהֵיךָ:¹¹

May we all learn for ourselves, and inspire those around us to bring God’s message with us on our every endeavor, so that wherever we are, whatever we are doing, whether dwelling in our homes or going out into the world, we are constantly aware of our moral duties and we bring them to fruition, so that we may do what God asks of us - to do justice and love righteousness, and to walk humbly with our God.

¹⁰ Deuteronomy 6:6-7.
¹¹ Micah 6:7-8.