

Truth

Middah for the Hebrew Month of Nisan 5773

1 Nisan 5773 - March 12, 2013

What are Middot?

Pirkei Avot (6:6) teaches that the Torah is greater than the priesthood or royalty. According to our tradition, royalty is acquired through 30 middot – virtues or qualities. To be a priest in the ancient Temple, you needed 24 virtues. But the Torah -- the ultimate path we strive to take -- is acquired through 48 middot --

48 character traits by which we measure our lives.

Rabbi Alan Morinis says in his book, 'Everyday Holiness,' that each one of us has every single one of the 48 character traits. He writes: 'What sets one person apart from another is not whether we have certain traits while someone else has different ones, but rather the degree, or measure of the traits that live in each of

our souls.' The angriest person, for example, has an excess of the anger trait, but Mussar, (Jewish ethical literature from 19th century Eastern Europe) insists that there must be at least some degree of calm within that raging soul. So must there also be a touch of anger in even the calmest individual. The stingiest person still has at least a grain of generosity, and so on with all the traits." (Everyday Holiness, pg. 19).

Background texts*

- Truth should extend to all aspects of life – in advertising, in politics, in business, in academics, with our friendships, with our family, in fidelity to one's spouse. The letters of the word *Emet* (truth) are *alef*, *mem*, and *tav*. They represent the first, middle and final letters of the alphabet. While the letters that form the word *sheker* which means falsehood, are made up of the 19th, 20th and 21st letters (the penultimate letters) of the alphabet. Truth is all-encompassing. Falsehood is narrow and deceiving.
- "The Rabbis taught: How does one dance before the bride? The House of Shammai says: One describes the bride as she actually is. The House of Hillel says: 'A beautiful and graceful bride.' Shammai said to Hillel: say she is lame or blind; we say to her, 'A beautiful and graceful bride'? But the Torah said, 'You shall distance yourself from matters of falsehood!' Hillel said to Shammai: According to your view, one who made a poor purchase in the market – should one praise it in his eyes, or denigrate it in his eyes? Surely we would say, he should praise it in his eyes. From here the Sages said: One's disposition must always be pleasant towards people." (Ketubot 16b) [Comment: There is a commandment to rejoice with bride and groom. By praising a bride's beauty

you are lifting her joy and fulfilling that important commandment.]

- To avoid insulting someone, you are allowed to tell a white lie. (Sefer Hasidim).
- There are seven types of thieves, but a "thought thief" (one who deceives another) is the worst of all. (Mechilta Mishpatim 13, 135)
- Oral deception is much worse than monetary fraud because restoration is possible in the latter (monetary fraud), while no restoration is possible in the former (oral deception) and monetary fraud concerns one's money while oral deception affects one's person. (Mishnah Torah, Book Twelve, "Acquisitions," 14:18.)
- To understand truthfulness, one must also understand deceit.
- Such is the punishment of the liar – even when speaking the truth, the person is not listened to by anyone (*Sanhedrin 89b*).
- There are three types of truthfulness: *Bein adam l'chavero*, truthfulness between one person and another; *Bein adam l'atzmo*, truthfulness between a person and him or herself; *Bein adam l'makom* – truthfulness between a person and God
- From the cowardice that shrinks from new truths; From the laziness that is content with half truths; From the arrogance that thinks it knows all truths; O, God of Truth, deliver us. (Mordecai M. Kaplan

*Many of the texts are adapted from *Everyday Holiness* by

A Story from our Sacred Texts

Capturing the Middah

Numbers 30

Moses said to the heads of the tribes of Israel: This is what the Lord commands: When a man makes a vow to the Lord or takes an oath to obligate himself by a pledge, he must not break his word but must do everything he said.

Babylonian Talmud Makkot 24a

It is told of Rabbi Safra that he had an article to sell. A certain man came to him while Rabbi was reciting the "Shema" and said, "Let me have the article for such and such a price." When Rabbi Safra didn't answer, the would-be purchaser, thinking Rabbi Safra was not willing to sell for the offered price, kept increasing the amount, saying, "Let me have it for more money." After Rabbi Safra finished saying the "Shema," he said, "Take the article at the price you mentioned first, for I was willing to sell it to you at that price."



5101 Providence Road
Charlotte, NC 28226
info@beth-el.com

Through this year of 5773, at Temple Beth El we will be working on **Tikkun Hanefesh** – repairing and renewing our souls through the study of a genre of Jewish literature called **Middot**. On the first day of each new Hebrew month, you we will receive a **Middah Guide**. The word **Middot** means measures or character traits. Our lives are measured by the character we have. Each study guide will have background on the middah of the month and exercises to daily remind us of the character trait we are working on.

MIDDAH WORKOUT FOR ADAR

Middah Meditation – *To remind yourself to strive for Truth, select one of the following quotes to say every morning. You can rotate the quotes.*

- The signature of The Holy Blessed One is truth – The Talmud, Shabbat 55a
- Anyone who doesn't take truth seriously in small matters cannot be trusted in large ones either. - Albert Einstein

- If you tell the truth, you don't have to remember anything.
- Mark Twain

- Do not allow anything to pass your lips that you are not certain is completely true.
- Rabbi Menachem Mendel Lefin of Satanov, Cheshbon ha-Nefesh

- Truth stands forever – falsehood has no legs.

Middah Exercise

For the *middah* of *emet*, each day of this month pause before you speak and think about whether what are you about to say is true.

REFLECTIONS

Discussion: What does it mean that God is truth? If God is also described as *rachamim* – compassionate then in what circumstances should we show compassion and temper the truth? When do the above stories advise that one should hold back on the truth? Why does Maimonides consider deception with words worse than stealing? Do you agree? What are examples of a white lie that helps to keep peace in the home or peace in a marriage or friendship? When does a white lie cross the line?

Discussion: What is the relationship between vows and truthfulness? Why are vows so important in the Torah? When someone is described as 'a man of one's word,' what does that mean? How important to you is truthfulness in your relationships? Why is Rabbi Safra in the Talmudic story willing to sell the article for the lower price? How does the character trait of truth apply to the realm of business?

For further background, consider purchasing in our Discovered Traditions Temple Beth El Gift Shop: *Everyday Holiness* by Rabbi Alan Moranis (Boston: Trumpeter Books, 2007).