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Our Values: Fighting for Them

We've been looking at values throughout these High Holidays. Because they are, once again, core to who we are, personally, spiritually, religiously, nationally. Last week, we looked at clarifying them. Last night, we talked about holding onto them. Today, we'll look at how, and with whom, we need to fight for them.

We don't fight for our values simply because not everyone else shares them. We wouldn't expect that. We fight for them because sometimes people, particularly people in power, are openly, or not so openly, hostile to them, and to the fundamental tenets of human decency.

Seymour Hersh is a journalist. Which is a little like saying Luciano Pavarotti is a tenor. Hersh is a Pulitzer prize winner and in a career that dates back to the 1960's, has uncovered more serious scandals than we have time to recount. This year, at the age of eighty-one, he published a memoir, called *Reporter*.

A reviewer summarized the main points of his book: 1) The powerful will prey mercilessly upon the powerless, and if so inclined, will commit anything and everything up to and including mass murder. 2) They will lie about it. 3) Most often, the media will let them get away with it.
<[https:// theintercept.com/2018/06/02/seymour-hersh-memoir-reporter/](https://theintercept.com/2018/06/02/seymour-hersh-memoir-reporter/)>

Even for cynics, that's a splash of cold water. It flies in the face of everything we **want** to believe about people, especially people in power, who, after all, usually get there by claiming to represent our better values and the greater good. But we know it is true that power corrupts.

The Rabbis knew it too. In the beginning, they said, people may know that what they are doing is wrong, but they think they can stop whenever they want and turn back, do *teshuvah*, before things get out of control.

In the beginning, say the Rabbis, the wrongdoers are bound to their sins as if by the threads of a spider's web. It's easy to break free. But as time goes on and the behavior continues, those threads become thick cords and iron chains, from which escape is embarrassing at best and impossible at worst.

For people with power, having it and using it, becomes its own reward. It is the most seductive of all idolatries. More than money, fame, sex, anything we can name. And it can overpower the **values** of all but the most principled people.

The Rabbis knew this too. They even had a saying for it: *K'godel ha'adam, gadol yitzro heimenu* —the more powerful the man, the more powerful his appetites. (Talmud, *Sukkah* 52a) And they weren't referring to food.

It's not hard to understand. Amass enough power and you get to act like a god. And who can resist that? But acting like a god is idolatry, in this case, self-idolatry. And as every student of mythology knows, idolatrous gods can be depended on to act irresponsibly, violently, unwisely. The Prophets called idolatry public enemy #1 because it undermined every higher value. For this reason, it needs to be fought.

In the Bible, God did a lot of the the heavy lifting. Adam and Eve hungered for the power they thought the forbidden fruit would give them. Out from Eden they went. Pharaoh, as self-absorbed a ruler as there ever was, watched his entire kingdom collapse rather than acknowledge there were values, and powers, higher than his own. King David sent a man to his death because it gave him power over that man's wife. For that, and other sins, he was forbidden to build the Temple.

I believe that God's law and spirit still brings down idolaters who may be in thrall to their own power. But it's best if we fight alongside. When

executives, coaches, mentors, bosses, racists, gunmen, corrupt officials and even clergy, abuse their power and violate the personal and sacred trust placed in them, it's our job to make sure they don't get away with it.

They go to the lengths they do to hide and get away with it because they know that what they are doing is wrong. In the meantime, the value of integrity, and often the value of life itself, is trampled.

Hersh is right. People with power will abuse it, lie about it, and do whatever they can to pretend that it's all okay. The Rabbis were right too: thick cords and iron chains. But if we fight and God helps, sooner or later they will pay the price. We live with this faith.



The fight for values doesn't only take place "out there." It also happens "in here."

Pope Francis made some religious news recently when he proposed changing a part of the translation of the Lord's Prayer. Instead of, "**Lead us not** into temptation," he suggested replacing it with, "**Do not let us fall** into temptation."

He evidently believed that the existing version implied that God might somehow nudge us in the wrong direction. Which is not the way that most believers in the one God, Christian, Jewish or other, understand it. "**Do not let us fall...**" on the other hand, places the responsibility for handling temptation more squarely on us. All this caused a bit of a kerfuffle in the Church which we don't have to worry about. <https://nyti.ms/2BPf0br>

But the idea that temptation needs to be fought is not originally a Christian concept. Unsurprisingly, they got it from us. In our daily morning prayers we read, "[Help] us to keep from error, sin and transgression. . . Do not allow our *Yetzer HaRa*—evil inclination — to control us. Help us to stay away from bad people. Strengthen our desire

to do good.” In our versions, God is there more to help, not to lead us in the wrong direction.

But either way, repeating whatever prayers are in whatever book is not enough. If we are going to win the fight for our values, we will need to find a way to defeat our lesser selves. And we will never wage a more important fight.



There are a few ways I could have gone with this. Food was a finalist but I decided to go with screens. You know, smartphone screens, TV screens, tablet screens, desktop screens, now screens on wristwatches. They are everywhere, they are enormously useful, and they challenge us every single day.

At first, we adopt them as tools. But over time, they have a way of becoming our masters. They may have once held us as the threads of a spider’s web, but now they’ve become heavy cords and iron chains. And when we spend as much time with them some of us do, (please note the use of the first person plural inclusive ;-)) they can undermine the core human value of personal interaction.

Even though we all know this, it is still difficult to pry ourselves away. Because, we know this too: they push our buttons, give us our pellets, and keep us engaged. They are built and designed to lock us in — and they are very good at it.

I’ll use TV news an example — even if it’s kind of old school. Once it’s on, it can be difficult to turn off. They are continually manufacturing crises. Even when things are relatively quiet, and they haven’t been lately but still, on TV news, it’s never less than Defcon 3. We can’t watch for more than a minute without “breaking news,” a “news alert,” or a major “update.” And each one is designed to goad us into something just this side of panic, which is evidently the sweet spot for keeping the greatest number of us glued in. It distorts the lens through which we see the world as well as the lens through which we see one another.

It also reduces real news, which should be the subject of thoughtful, principled and nuanced discussion, to, most often, attractively packaged caricature.

Worse, it is frequently designed to confirm our pre-existing biases. Which may make us think we are standing up for our values, which, unless we are doing something beyond watching television, we are not.

The bottom line is that if we value real understanding about the world around us, we not getting it from those screens. And lack of understanding is no small matter. Lack of understanding leads to fear; fear leads to hatred; and hatred leads to violence.

In this country, we've seen too of all of that. And there is more simmering just below the surface.



So how do we fight all this? There are at least two ways.

- 1) Turn our heads away from TV screens and see if we can't get our news from sources that are qualitatively superior. Did you know that there are more words on the front page of a decent broadsheet newspaper than there are in a half-hour TV news show? It's true. And they are usually better written.
- 2) Re-engage with people, not only people who will confirm our biases, but those who will challenge them. People who may spur us to think differently, who may force us to develop some **cognitive flexibility**. That's a value it is important to embrace.

We can also, and I'm going to quote a teacher of mine word for word here: "Read books!" We know that nine times out of ten, the book is better than the movie. At least as often, it is better than a TV news show.

We Jews are still known as the People of the Book. And those of us who study Torah here know what a great value it is to be engaged with it. But the Torah is not the only book. We've got libraries in town and a pretty decent Jewish one right here at the KJCC.

Author Fran Lebowitz famously said, “Think before you Speak. Read before you Think.” Especially during these times, when change is rampant, it’s hard to keep up, much less grow, if we are not reading, and thinking anew, as we go.

Carl Jung said, “Thoroughly unprepared, we take the step into the afternoon of life. We cannot live in the afternoon of life according to the program of life's morning. For what was great in the morning will be little use at evening, and what in the morning was true at evening will have become a lie.”

We need to change as life changes. That’s what this day is all about. Weaker from fasting, our defenses down, can we point ourselves in a better direction. We call that *teshuvah*. It’s a great value. Yes, it can be a fight. And it may be a battle we lose. But let’s not pretend we don’t need to wage it.



In every human culture there are stories about dragons. We know the plot. A fearsome dragon is threatening the people. The hero goes off, and after however much adventure, fights and slays the dragon. He, or she, returns triumphant, stronger, and wiser than before.

There are only a few dragon stories in Judaism. With our share of Pharaohs, Hamans, and anti-Semites in every generation, we haven’t had much need to conjure imaginary ones.

But the most powerful and dangerous dragon is the one inside of us, the one that Sy Hersh identified. The one that tempts us, the one that rages, the one that tells us to use our power to do whatever we want, lie about it and then try to get away with it. The one that threatens to kill our better selves. The one that tells us that our values are more refined than they really are, or, are just too much trouble to fight for. How do we slay that dragon? How do we keep that dragon from slaying us?

Again, the Rabbis have an answer: through our three values of *Torah*, *Avodah* and *Gemilut Chasadim*. By absorbing into our character

teachings that elevate and refine us — that is *Torah*; by **servicing** the Highest, within and around us — that is *Avodah*; and by **extending ourselves** on behalf of others, **with love** — *Gemilut Chasadim*. Taken together, these three can be kryptonite for dragons. The only question is, do we have the courage to deploy it?

Again, Carl Jung, “I am not what happened to me. I am what I choose to become.” When it comes to our values, are we choosing to fight for them, or are we letting them wither and die? There is really not much middle ground.

Even if we do fight, there is no guarantee that victory will be total. But if we don't, it won't even be partial. Either way, when all is said and done, once more, it is our values that will define what is written by us and about us in the Book of Life.

I hope that during these days, we have helped to clarify them, better hold onto them and resolve to, when necessary, fight for them. Taken together, this gives us our best chance for a

G'mar chatimah tovah.