

"FRANKNESS"
As Vice and as Virtue

Most people have mixed feelings with regard to that uncommon quality called frankness or candor -- and that is as it should be. It is something no doubt to be admired, and all too rare in human relations. And yet it can, in the wrong hands, be misused for the wrong purposes and prove dangerous and disruptive. On the one hand, frankness is based on emet, truth, and our tradition teaches that chotamo shel ha-kadosh barukh hu emet, that the very seal and insignia of G-d is truth. Frankness is a prerequisite for clear and uncomplicated human and social relationships. Candor, while it may momentarily be annoying, ultimately proves to be the best guarantee of honorable living. It engenders a greater degree of truthfulness on the part of others as well. "Frankness," said Emerson, "invites more frankness." And on the other hand, it can be a tool of the smug, self-certain, and even the malicious who tyrannize friend and foe alike by their disarming bluntness which goes by the name of frankness.

Perhaps, then, in order to view the quality of frankness from a greater perspective, we ought to recall the ethics of Judaism as taught by Maimonides, one in which he gives us a philosophy of character. In general, Maimonides teaches, we should avoid the extremes of character and keep to the derekh ha-shem, the "way of G-d," which he also calls the shevil ha-zahav, the "golden path." In other words, one should generally follow the path of moderation, although in certain specific instances one may veer more towards ~~the~~ one extreme than the other. So it is with the quality of truth-telling or frankness. The two extremes are, one, ~~folly~~ absolute candor even at the expense of another person's happiness, sensitivity, and peace of mind; and two, so much kindness and deference to the feelings of people that the truth is never spoken in its fulness, and untruth begins to prevail. Following the derekh ha-shem as explained by Maimonides, we would say that in general one ought to be moderate in his frankness, tempering his manner of expressing the truth with gentleness and sensitive concern for the feelings of

others, but that in certain very special cases one must veer towards one of the extremes, in this case that of greater veracity, more direct frankness and forthrightness.

One of those special cases where frankness must prevail even at the expense of temporary unhappiness is hinted at in this morning's Torah reading, according to the brilliant interpretation of R. Naftali Tzvi Yehudah Berlin, the revered teacher at the Yeshiva of Volozhin, widely known by his initials, Netziv.

A great tragedy marred the lives of Isaac and Rebecca. We shall read next week of the painful confusion with regard to the blessings Isaac offered to his twin sons, Jacob and Esau. Apparently, Isaac favored Esau, and Rebecca preferred Jacob. In order to reserve Isaac's blessing for Jacob and prevent its waste on Esau, Rebecca schemes with her son Jacob, and persuades ^{him} to do something which runs against the whole grain of his character: deceive his aged, blind father. The scheme is successful, but the end result is one of unrelieved anguish for all principals. Esau is left embittered, and more vagrant than ever. Jacob has soiled his soul and must flee from his brother into a long and bitter exile. Rebecca, the doting mother, is to die before she ever again sees her beloved Jacob. Isaac is confused and bewildered in the deep darkness that surrounds him.

And yet, when we study and analyze the Sidra carefully, we find that the tragedy is compounded by the fact that it was totally unnecessary. Isaac did not really favor Esau over Jacob. He merely wanted to prevent his total moral collapse. He wanted to salvage whatever shred of decency Esau still retained. He knew full well the difference in the characters of his two children. He, no less than his wife Rebecca, appreciated the saintliness of Jacob and suffered because of the wildness and sensuousness of Esau. He had never intended to give the blessing of Abraham to anyone but Jacob.

Why then the cross-purposes at which Isaac and Rebecca worked? If they were indeed in total agreement, why this deep and cutting tragedy that destroyed the happiness of this second Jewish family in all history? Because, ~~the~~ Netziv answers, Rebecca never learned how to be frank with her own husband. She was possessed of an inner inhibition which, despite her love for him, prevented free and easy communication with him. It was a congenital defect in her character. If only Rebecca had been frank with Isaac, if only she could have overcome her inhibitions and shyness and taken him into her confidence -- they would have discovered that they do, after all, agree ~~on~~ in fundamentals, and how much heartache would have been avoided!

And the Netziv sees this quality of restraint and suspiciousness in the very first act the Torah records of Rebecca when she first meets her prospective husband. We read this morning of how she is told by Eliezer that Isaac is coming towards them. What does she do? --- She slips off her camel, and va-tikach et ha-tze'if va-titkas, she takes her veil and covers herself. This was not, says the Netziv, so much an act of modesty and shyness, as much as a symbol of a lack of frankness, an uncommunicativeness that was to hamper her happiness the rest of her life. In all her dealings with her husband, she was metaphorically to veil her personality. That veiling presaged the lack of frankness, the restraint, between the two. The veil became, in the course of years, a wall which grew ever larger and kept them apart and prevented them from sharing their deepest secrets, fears, loves, and aspirations.

Indeed, that is why the Torah tells us of certain domestic and seemingly purely private quarrels between Sarah and Abraham, and Jacob and Rachel. *verses 2, Sarah laughs, and she denies it to Abraham. He turns to her in* One might ask, why reveal for all eternity the domestic spats between anger and says, you did so laugh. Rachel wants children, and keeps urging Jacob for help. Jacob turns to her and seems quite irritated: why do you annoy me, do you think I am G-d that I can give you children? We can now understand

why these incidents are recorded: they are there for contrast. They show us how the other patriarchs and matriarchs exercised complete candor in their private lives. If there must be a slight argument, let there be one, but let husband and wife be perfectly honest with each other. Let there be no distance between them, no dissembling, no outer politeness which bespeaks an inner remoteness. How different was Rebecca from Sarah and Rachel! There was so little frankness in her relations with Isaac, so little straightforwardness --- and therefore, so much agony, so much unnecessary pain and frustration!

Indeed, it would seem as if Eliezer, Abraham's servant whom he had sent to fetch a wife for his son Isaac, recognized this at the very outset. Charged with this grave and significant mission of looking for a wife for Isaac, a worthy mother of the Jewish people, Eliezer feels himself diffident and concerned. He prays for divine assistance, and twice he singles out one element above all others: chesed -- love, kindness. May G-d show my master Abraham chesed, may He grant that his son be blessed with a wife whose greatest virtue ^{will} ~~would~~ be kindness, love, sensitive understanding, self-sacrifice. If he can find that kind of wife, Eliezer thinks to himself, who will bring chesed to her new home, then he will consider his mission successfully accomplished. And yet, after he has met young Rebecca, after he has satisfied himself that this is the right woman for his master's son, he offers a prayer of thanksgiving in which he surprisingly adds another quality: barukh ha-Shem Elokei adoni Avraham asher lo azav chasdo va-amito me-im adoni, blessed is the Lord G-d of my master Abraham who has not forsaken His chesed (mercy) and also amito, His emet (truth) from my master. If we read between the lines we discover that Eliezer is quite satisfied that this young woman will bring chesed to her home. She will be a kind, devoted, loving wife. But what suddenly begins to disturb his innermost thoughts, perhaps only unconsciously, is that while there will be enough chesed, there ^{will} ~~would~~ be a lack of emet or

truthfulness in the sense of candor, there ^{may} ~~would~~ not be enough frankness because she ^{will} ~~would~~ be too kind, too fearful, too gentle to speak openly and lucidly with her own husband. How wise was that old and loyal slave of Abraham! Thank you, G-d, for the chessed; now help us with a little more emet.

Domestic life, then, is one of those areas, where we ought to leave the exact path of moderation and bend towards one of the extremes, that of greater openness, greater frankness and honesty even at the expense of comfort and unperturbed peace of mind. Even to this day, before the chuppah we perform the badeken or veiling of the bride, recalling the veiling of Rebecca. Yet, as if to emphasize that we intend thereby only the idea of modesty and not that of inhibition, we read the Ketubah, in which we include the promise of the husband that he will act towards his wife in the manner of Jewish husband^s, who palchin umokrin ve'zanin umefarnes in li-neshehon, who work for, love, and support their wives, and then the key word: be'kushta, in truth. Kushta or emet --- truth --- should be the dominant mood that prevails in the home. Without it, without full and free frankness, husband and wife cannot act in concert with regard to the great issues in life, especially with regard to the greatest gift entrusted to them: their children.

And yet, while frankness is so very important in domestic relations, and while it is a wonderful and indispensable personal quality in all human relations, there is no question but that frankness can be overdone. Truth has the greatest claims on us; but its claims are not absolute. That is why the Talmud specifically permits the talmid chakham or scholar to modify the truth in three instances, where complete candor would result in needless embarrassment. Not to tell a lie is a great virtue, but compulsively to tell all, to reveal all your innermost feelings without regard for others, is itself an unethical quality. Do you recall Abraham walking with Isaac to perform the Akedah? Isaac asked his father, I see the fire and the wood but where is the lamb for the sacrifice? Imagine if Abraham had exercised

absolute frankness, unrestrained candor. He would have said: sorry son, but it is you I shall have to slaughter upon the altar. It would have been inhumanly cruel. That is why Abraham preferred to dodge the question with the reply: G-d will take care of that. Or imagine if a physician who had just discovered that his patient is suffering from a terrible and incurable disease were to turn to him, and, without any attempt to cushion the news, inform him bluntly of his imminent death? This kind of frankness is sub-human. It is living on the extreme edge of character, against which Maimonides counselled. That is why the Halakhah decides (see Taz on Yoreh Deah) that if a person does not know his relative has died, and you do know it, and he will not learn of it during the 30 days if you keep silent, then you must keep the information within and spare him the bad news.

Excessive frankness is, thus, a fault, a vice and not a virtue. When a friend begins a conversation with the words, "to be brutally frank..." you may be sure that he intends brutality more than frankness. A whimsical poet once wrote, "... of all plagues, good Heaven, Thy wrath can send, / Save, save, oh save ~~me~~ from the Candid Friend."

Emet is, thus, a virtue, if tempered with graciousness. Emet is important enough to be the connecting link between the Shema and the Amidah. Yet we must remember that this emet is not mentioned alone. Along with it we enumerate a whole list of qualities which tend to make truth more palatable, which moderate frankness and make it human. Emet must also be yatziv ve'nakhon ve'kayam ve'yashar, proper and straight; it must be ne'eman ve'ahuv ve'chaviv ve'nechmad, ve'na'im, loyalty and pleasantly and attractively presented; even if it ^{is} nora v'adir, an awesome and powerful truth, still it must be metukan u-mekubal, prepared for and acceptable to human sensitivity, and above all, ve-tov ve'yafeh, expressed in a manner that is good and beautiful. Frankness, yes; but mentschlichkeit as well. Emet -- but up to and including tov ve'yafeh.
Only then ^{can} we be sure that ha-davar ha-zeh alenu l'alam va-ed, that this truth will remain with us forever.

That is why the Halakhah maintained that the law of hokheiach tokhiach, of reproaching the sinner, must be executed with a great deal of delicacy and attention to individual feelings. "Here is, in Judaism, an ethics of criticism. A frank reproof may be in itself unavoidably painful, but one should minimize the anguish and the guilt and the feelings of inferiority and worthlessness that may needlessly result from it.

Too much frankness, candor with cruelty, is one of the causes of the lapse from religious faith as well. Saadia, in the Introduction to his major work, the Emunot ve'Deot, lists eight causes of heresy, of skepticism. One of them is: ha-emet ha-marah, the bitter truth. Truth is often difficult to face, bitter to taste, and people may prefer to flee the unpleasant truth and satiate themselves with ^{the} sweet vagaries of falsehood. I believe that in our day an even more frequent cause of the disdain some people feel for Judaism, is that the truth, Torah, is presented as something bitter and terrible. "When, instead of teaching Torah as an ennobling and uplifting doctrine, we force it down the throats of children as something dreadfully boring and meaninglessly restrictive; if it is advocated to adults as something dogmatic and irrelevant, if it is supported not by explanation but coercion, not by an appeal to conscience but by boycotts and smear-literature and stonings -- then the emet becomes so bitter as to alienate large sections of our people from Torah. Torah is "sweeter than honey." It is a crime to present it as dipped in gall. Frankness should not be confused with foolishness, and candor should not be confounded with crude, cruel coarseness.

Frankness, then, is a great virtue. In all life, but especially in domestic life, is it an absolutely indispensable ingredient of happiness. Because she lacked it, because her personality and innermost heart was veiled, was Rebecca's life filled with misery. Yet, frankness must be attended by the grace of consideration, delicacy, sensitivity.

Every morning, we begin the day with the following statement which sums up what we have been saying. Le'olam yehe adam yere shamayim be'seter u-va-galui, 7 6233

a man should always be G-d fearing, both publicly and privately; u-modeh al ha-emet, let him always recognize and acknowledge the truth. But once he has acknowledged the truth, once he has learned it -- it is not always important to blurt it out unthinkingly. For, insofar as speaking out the whole truth -- let him be ve'dover emet bi-levavo, telling all the truth only in his heart. When it comes to telling all that one considers to be the truth, exactly as one sees it and believes it, in all candor and frankness, there one must be judicious, consider the secret fears and vanities of his fellows, their sensitivities and idiosyncracies. Complete and uninhibited frankness -- only bi-levavo, in one's own heart. Otherwise, ^{candor}~~frankness~~ must be wedded to consideration, chasdo va-amito as Eliezer prayed, or emet to yatziv through tov ve'yafeh, as is our own devoted prayer every day all year long.

For this indeed is, as Maimonides called it, the derekh ha-Shem, the way of the Lord. And it is this "way" which has been beque^athed to us by Father Abraham and which we were commanded to teach to our children. Ki yedativ le'maan asher yetzayeh et banav ve'et beto acharav, "for I have known him, to the end that he may command his children and his household after him," ve'shamru et derekh ha-Shem, "that they may keep the 'way of the Lord,'" la-asot tzedakah u-mishpat for in this way will righteousness and justice be achieved.