

Terumah 5778 Sermon

I once had the chance to see a museum exhibit on ancient Egypt. I was particularly interested in the various aspects of Egyptian burial rites. Burial for Egypt's kings involved not only mummification, but entombment within multiple gold sarcophagi, one nested within another. The amount of fine work and expense lavished on kings at burial is amazing, given the assumption was that after the king's tomb was sealed, no living person would ever see all of that fabulously wrought gold work. It was meant to honor the king on his journey to the next world. Of course, everyone in Egypt knew that the kings were buried this way, and in fact there was widespread looting of the kings' tombs even in antiquity. Even though no one was meant to ever see these objects again, everyone knew of their existence, their beauty and their value.

That same kind of lavish attention to detail is described in the Torah portion, and that same public knowledge of seldom-seen objects is also in play. Every element of the *mishkan*, the Tabernacle, that the Israelites construct for God, receives 'royal treatment.' The outer and inner curtains, the altars, the washing basin – all the furnishings of the *mishkan* - are crafted with tremendous care and at great expense, despite the fact that few people will ever see the inside of the *mishkan*. Further, the parshah's description of the *aron*, the ark, is tantalizingly similar to the cabinet in which Egyptian kings were interred and, like the burial cabinet, the *aron* is usually kept hidden away, rarely seen in the biblical period and never seen in the time of the first Temple, except by the *kohen gadol*.

In fact, the inside of the *aron* will never again be seen by anyone, yet both its inside and outside are described as being covered in gold. Why?

The rabbis of the Talmud saw an ethical teaching inherent in the construction of the *aron* with gold inside and out. They said that it teaches us that a true scholar is one whose inside is the same as their outside, in other words whose character matches their words and actions. For the sages, a scholar is the pinnacle of Jewish society, but the same idea can just as easily be applied to anyone. To what extent does the way we present ourselves to the world comport with who we are at home, with who we are in our hearts? Moreover, how important is it that one matches the other? Is the ideal itself even one to which we should aspire? When is a tension between who we are and what we do hypocrisy, and when is it mere inconsistency?

It may be that hypocrisy is in the eye of the beholder. Consider the following examples: Many parents teach their child not use drugs or alcohol or to engage in premarital sex, even when they themselves engaged in some or all of those behaviors in their own youths. Is that hypocrisy, as their children might claim, or is it the inconsistency that comes from wisdom born of experience? What about people who keep kosher in their homes, but not outside of them? Is that hypocrisy or the inconsistent, yet honest, attempt to integrate into the larger society, where keeping kosher is difficult, while remaining loyal to Jewish law and custom in the sphere where that is still possible? How about politicians or religious leaders who espouse morals and ‘family values’ that

we so often learn apply to others, but not to themselves? Is that hypocrisy or the inconsistency that is inherent in stating an ideal and then in all-too-human fashion failing to live up to that ideal?

Even if we acknowledge the difficulty in distinguishing hypocrisy from inconsistency, it still seems wrong to present one reality to others, yet to embody an entirely different reality. But is it really? We often behave differently when we are with different people or in different circumstances. We use a different register of language when speaking to children than we do to adults, as well as different ways of speaking publicly than we do privately. We observe a certain level of decorum when we are in the sanctuary on Shabbat, yet with a terrific lack of decorum when we are in the sanctuary on Purim. That doesn't make us hypocrites, just inconsistent. Those kinds of inconsistencies are a better gauge of the whole, integrated person than a single, unwavering devotion to a single aspect of our personalities.

When you get right down to it, objections to inconsistency and hypocrisy are based more than anything else on our distaste for being lied to. We feel it is dishonest for someone to tell us something, or represent themselves one way, and then find out that the opposite is really true. Hypocrisy is a lie found out; it is an inconsistency in someone's words or deeds that they would not want known. Inconsistency, in and of itself, is widely viewed as acceptable or even praiseworthy. In his famous essay Self Reliance, Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote "A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds," although

it is unclear to me if Emerson meant that it is only 'foolish' consistency that he disdained, or consistency generally.

So the sages of the Talmud's insistence on consistency must be read differently if we are to ascribe their words any value at all. When they say that a scholar's inside should be like their outside, they are not speaking about hypocrisy but rather about untruthfulness. They would not expect anyone to speak and act the same way in private as in public, or never to vary their mood, language or actions. Their lesson is that we should not speak or act in ways that attempt to fool other people about who we are. We should not pretend to be, or claim to be, something that we are not.

I have grown more comfortable with inconsistency in life as I have gotten older. It doesn't bother me to see people whose insides are not as golden as their outsides. In some cases, I'm grateful that even the outside is golden or even, in this time of international competition, silver or bronze. For most of us, it is probably better that we show our best face to others around us. Our real challenge is to actually be as good as the people that we show ourselves to be.

Shabbat shalom.