YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**ROSH HASHANA 5783**

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In memory of Batya Furst z"l Niftera 28 Elul 5765.   
Dedicated by her family.

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**Purify Our Hearts to Serve You with Truth**

Based on a *sicha* by

**Harav Aharon Lichtenstein** ***zt”l*[[1]](#footnote-1)**

The Rambam notes in his opening discussion of prayer (Hilkhot Tefilla 1:4) that standardized tefilla provides a ready instrument of prayer for all, thus upgrading the fulfillment of the mitzva by those who, left to their own devices, would be hard put to implement it properly. Nevertheless, as critics have often noted, what frequently governs our perception and experience of these texts is the fact that they are imposed ritual obligation; the specific content of the texts influences us less.

Everyone can attest to the extent to which his experience has assumed this character, and everyone, therefore, can define for himself the concomitant need to cope with the natural tendency toward rote recitation, against which moralists and pietists of all persuasions have railed persistently.[[2]](#footnote-2) Nevertheless, each of us can also attest to a special affinity for specific texts, which penetrate the barriers of routine ­performance, speak to one’s particular situation, and address themselves to one’s innermost being. These texts permeate the spiritual self with richness and intensity, and therefore occupy a special place in one’s heart.

For me, one such text is the familiar supplication, “Ve-taher libbenu le-ovdekha be-emet, Purify our hearts to serve You with truth.” Since it is recited not only on the High Holidays, but on every Shabbat and Festival, it has always struck me as the conspectus of a number of central themes telescoped within it. I would like to share with you some thoughts and feelings about this plea, by analyzing the substantive content and various interwoven strands of its highly compressed conclusion, “le-ovdekha be-emet, To serve You with truth.”

**What Does** *Emet* **Add to** *Avoda***?**

To plead, “Ve-taher lobbing le-ovdekha be-emet,” is to imply that avoda, service, does not include emet, truth, by definition; that one could halakhically be regarded as serving the Almighty even when serving without emet. What, then, we ask ourselves, is the incremental demand or, at the very least, aspiration, entailed by the additional dimension of be-emet?

I believe we ought to speak, rather, of demands and aspirations in the plural. This point is best borne out if we ask ourselves to what be-emet is counterposed. Having raised the question, one readily perceives that truth has at least two distinct, primary opposites, each of which is itself multifaceted: error and falsehood. Anyone endowed with even minimal moral sensibility, let alone philosophic insight, recognizes the radical difference between ta’ut, error, and sheker, deception. The former is concerned with correlation to fact, the latter with its distortion. When we articulate “Ve-taher libbenu le-ovdekha be-emet,” we pray for truth in both respects. We pray that our avoda will be devoid of both error and falsehood, that we serve in accordance with truth; and we pray that we do so, at a personal level, truthfully, without deceit or self-deceit. But what, more specifically, is the substance of our petition? We can appreciate this more fully by examining the components of truth’s antitheses.

*Emet* **as Opposed to Error**

When we analyze error, we can distinguish at least three significant elements: errors in Halakha, in emuna, and in seeking to understand God. Halakhic error entails the misinterpretation or misapplication of “the word of God,” namely, Halakha.[[3]](#footnote-3) On the basis of the practice of Rabbi Nechunya ben Ha-kaneh,[[4]](#footnote-4)the Rambam (Hilkhot Berakhot 10:23) postulates that one who enters the study hall should recite a short supplication. This brief prayer begins with a request not to stumble with regard to a matter of Halakha, and the same request is repeated at the prayer’s end in order to prevent his colleagues’ rejoicing over his stumbling, and, contrarily, to preclude his own rejoicing over their stumbling.

The repetition seems redundant, but the explanation is simple. The Rambam speaks of stumbling in two contexts, the first being the elucidation of Torah on the purely speculative plane. To a ben Torah, the possibility of error here is a critical matter, both out of commitment to truth as a universal value, and out of responsibility to the singular importance of the divine word. Secondly, there is potential for misstep in the field, possibly the minefield, of halakhic ruling, and it is to this that the second petition relates, and why it mentions the danger of rejoicing colleagues. Envious peers can, perhaps, overlook errors growing out of the free play of the mind in the course of a shiur; but there is nothing like a mistaken ruling to provide them instant and intense gratification.

We pray, then, simply out of our own spiritual aspirations, to attain halakhic truth in both respects. We wish to ascertain the truth of Torah, to plumb its depths and master its verities. It might seem that so long as a person has taken aim to the best of his ability, it seems to matter little, ultimately, whether or not he has hit the mark. The Gemara (Kiddushin 40a) states that a Jew is credited with full performance of a mitzva if he is intent on fulfilling a mitzva but is forcibly prevented from doing so. This, however, is only with respect to judgment of that person; at the level of accomplishment, to which a person of Halakha aspires, anyone endowed with a halakhic, as opposed to a purely Kantian, sensibility would be anguished beyond words were he suddenly to discover that his tefillin had been written improperly, so that, whatever his intention, he had never fulfilled the mitzva.

Contiguous to the area of Halakha, and yet distinct from it, is a second arena of potential error, that of emuna, the world of faith and doctrine. Emuna is both a central value in its own right, and a basis for the observance of mitzvot generally. Whether or not it is to be enumerated among the 613 mitzvot has been the subject of much debate since the time of the Rambam. What is beyond question, however, is the crucial role of faith as the substratum, both logical and psychological, of halakhic living in its totality. It is ikkar in the sense that Rav Yosef Albo notes in the introduction to his Sefer Ha-ikkarim,[[5]](#footnote-5) the fundamental element out of whose premises others derive and upon which the entire system rests. In this respect, surely, emuna occupies, and ought to occupy, a significant place in our spiritual life. While intellectual historians may note that, comparatively, dogma plays only a minor role in Judaism, in absolute terms, dogmatic faith is deeply entrenched within Judaism, a priori. Religion without dogma, as Whitehead noted,[[6]](#footnote-6)is unthinkable. “Le-ovdekha be-emet” entails, then, doctrinal truth as well. We pray that our emuna be steadfast and pure and that it be neither buffeted by the winds of skepticism and relativism, nor contaminated by the taints of schismatic heresy and heterodox revisionism.

The plea has particular poignancy for those who have been sig­nificantly exposed to these elements. As the French philosopher Ricoeur once remarked, the pristine innocence of naïve faith is, once lost, irrecoverable.[[7]](#footnote-7) Whether or not that is indeed the case, surely, if we pray for purity of heart, striving for innocent faith is very much part of our plea. Yehoshua, in his farewell address, counsels a religiously pallid and ambivalent Jewish people, “Now, therefore, revere the Lord and serve Him with sincerity and truth (be-tamim u-ve-emet)” (24:14). While the scriptural use of “tamim” – normally an adjective – does not wholly correspond to our own, nevertheless, the conjunction of “emet” and “tamim” indicates the extent to which innocent faith is part of the request of “le-ovdekha be-emet.”

Apart from the danger of residual skepticism or heresy, much of it socio-culturally conditioned, we are confronted by a third strain of error, one that is indigenous to the human condition as a whole. The mitzva of emuna – or, for that matter, the realm of divine service generally – imposes upon us a seemingly impossible mission. Let us suppose for a moment that a person were to define himself as a fervent devotee of the Almighty, whom he would then describe, Heaven forfend, as a wooden statue. His pronounced adherence notwithstanding, we would immediately regard him as a fool at best and an idolater at worst, justly deserving of the prophet Yeshayahu’s scorn (Yeshayahu 44:16–17) against one who takes a piece of lumber and uses half for firewood and the other half as a deity. The fact that this acolyte would present himself as committed to the name of the Almighty is, of course, of little moment. The critical question is how one conceives of the Creator. Worship of anything other than the Almighty is idolatry, regardless of how it is denominated.

But is our own situation inherently different? Does not anyone who envisions God as a rosh yeshiva with a long beard or as a supreme general fall into the same trap? Granted, the Torah uses various terms to describe, as it were, the Almighty, because at times He is revealed, and therefore perceived, as a master fighter, and at times as a kind, elderly gentleman.[[8]](#footnote-8) Nevertheless, the Almighty is by definition transcendent, a Deus absconditus, hidden in His numinous otherness, beyond human ken. He is, in Otto’s celebrated phrase, “the wholly other,” not even subject to comparison. “‘To whom shall you compare Me?’ says the Holy One” (Yeshayahu 40:25). He is “Kadosh, kadosh, kadosh, Transcendent, transcendent, transcendent” (Yeshayahu 6:3), incomprehensible, “for no man can apprehend Me and live” (Shemot 33:20). If so, all attempts to know Him, even in purely philosophical terms, are wide of the mark, and all our conceptions and imaginative ruminations define something else, someone else.

And here is our terrifying dilemma. We are commanded to relate to the Almighty and presumably we would seek Him even had we not been commanded; and yet we know that all our efforts are doomed to failure, that we shall always miss Him. Worse still, it is as though we direct our service to the sophisticated version, God forbid, of the wooden statue, which we have denominated as the deity. On the other hand, the more rigorously we reject anthropomorphism, the more difficult it becomes to realize the command and the aspiration to relate to Him, to love Him, and to serve Him.

On the conceptual plane, the dilemma is insoluble. Existentially and experientially, however, we live as metzuvvim ve-osim, commanded beings, in the knowledge that we have indeed been enjoined with two mandates. On the one hand, we know the gravity of the prohibition of idolatry and the radical difference between human and divine. This is the very heart of Judaism; it was on this point that Avraham Avinu parted company with the pagan world, and on this issue that we stand radically, and unalterably, opposed to Christianity. On the other hand, we are charged to relate to the Almighty, and this, at the personal level, is pervasive and perpetual: “Shivviti Hashem le-negdi tamid, I pose the Almighty before me at all times” (Tehillim 16:8). We are enjoined, then, to do our human best to transcend the apparent conflict, purify our conceptions, and serve the Almighty accordingly, secure in the knowledge that inasmuch as “The Torah was not given to the ministering angels” (Berakhot 25b et al.), our limited service will be accepted by God. The optimal balance is avoda be-emet, service of the Almighty that is both genuine and honest, and we strive constantly to achieve it as we plead, “Ve-taher libbenu le-ovdekha be-emet.”

*Emet* **as Opposed to Falsehood**

Moving from error to falsehood, here, too, several aspects bear consideration. Proverbially, falsehood has no feet,[[9]](#footnote-9) but it certainly has many tentacles. There is, first, sheer pretense, the exercise of sham divine service, with respect to which appearance bears little relation to reality. Much as we recoil from such conduct, there is, perhaps, something to be said for it, too. A seventeenth-century pundit, Francois de la Rochefoucauld, once suggested that hypocrisy is the tribute that vice pays to virtue,[[10]](#footnote-10) and the tacit recognition, at least externally, of the hegemony of truth is not without significance. Nevertheless, little needs to be said of outright hypocrisy, and those who exercise it habitually probably intend nothing of significance when they utter, “le-ovdekha be-emet.” However, Jewish and general moralists throughout the ages have noted that deception and hypocrisy have many levels. We will all recognize the justice of a remark made by one of the chassidic masters, that if an etrog were taken at home rather in shul, people would be less concerned about the punctiliousness of fulfilling the mitzva. And even for those of us who are fundamentally sincere, the temptation of showy and pretentious piety lurks incessantly. For rabbis and for rashei yeshiva, this is nothing short of an occupational hazard; while few take note of how long a laborer or a lawyer stands for Shemoneh Esrei, the spiritual mentor is the target of surrounding eyes. Yet even for the ordinary layman, the danger is acute enough. And there is always, as the proponents of Mussar persistently reminded us, the prospect of self-delusion. “The heart is deceitful above all things…who can understand it?” Yirmiyahu (17:9) asked, and the presumed reply is, clearly, not even the heart’s owner.

Beside the falsehood of sham, there is that of cant, religious existence that is not the real thing because it is shallow and shoddy. There is false spirituality, in the same sense that there are false notes in music; there is kitsch in serving God as there is in art – superficial emotion, stock responses, and pallid performance. This is the familiar order of “mitzvat anashim melummada” (Yeshayahu 29:13) – rote performance, of which I spoke at the outset, a world of desiccated spirit and insouciant observance. Irrespective of the extent to which it is animated by conformity, the jejune quality of this divine service is problematic by its very nature.

Akin to the sheker of shallowness is that of adulteration. This relates, in part, to the spiritual quality of a mitzva *per se,* and in part to its teleology, the purpose for which it is performed. But it relates primarily to the impetus of the mitzva. Granted, from a halakhic perspective, one is not inclined to accept the judgment of Thomas à Becket[[11]](#footnote-11) in T. S. Eliot’s “Murder in the Cathedral,” to the effect that “The last temptation is the greatest treason: to do the right thing for the wrong reason.” Surely Chazal held that not doing the right thing at all was the greater treason.

Rav Yehuda said in the name of Rav: A person should always engage in the study of Torah or the performance of *mitzvot,* even for the wrong motives, because these ultimately bring him to the level of pure motive (she-mitokh she-lo li-shmah ba li-shmah).[[12]](#footnote-12)

Moreover, the Rishonim generally assumed, with reference to this statement, that performance with ulterior motive has intrinsic merit and not just instrumental value as an initial step on the road to “li-shmah.”

Nevertheless, motivation is critical in establishing both the quality of an act and the worth of its agent, and our tradition has been keenly aware of this fact. Concern about the phenomenon of spiritual pride is firmly entrenched in Halakha, in the prohibition of yuhara, the injunction against adopting stringencies disproportionate to one’s general religious level, out of a desire to inflate one’s spiritual ego. In the same vein, the Yerushalmi (Chagiga 2:2) speaks of a woman who suffered unusual punishment in the netherworld, although she had presented a pious visage in the terrestrial; she had indeed fasted many times but had taken pains to publicize the fact. In the chapters devoted to the quality of tahara, purity, for which we pray, the Mesillat Yesharim (chap. 16) explains that just as there is a need for purity with regard to actions, to be certain that they are not under the wing of the yetzer ha-ra, so too there is a need for purity with regard to actions which, prima facie, belong to the Almighty. Even these may at times move away from pure divine service, which the Rambam, following both the Gemara in Nedarim (62a) and the Sifrei, linked with the central mitzva of loving God:

Chazal said: Lest a person say, I shall learn Torah in order that I should become financially opulent, in order that I should be called a rabbi, in order that I should get reward in the World-to-Come, so the verse says “To love God” – whatever you do, you should do solely out of love. (Hilkhot Teshuva 10:4)

The plea of “Ve-taher libbenu le-ovdekha be-emet” relates, then, to various aspects of the quest for truth: both to the discharge from error, be it halakhic, doctrinal, or iconographic, and to the emancipation from falsehood, superficiality, or adulteration.

**Integrity and Integration in the Quest for** *Emet*

The quest for emet is not simply the discharge of error or expulsion of falsehood. It bears a positive aspect as well, one perhaps underscored by the relationship between two words in English: integrity, in the dual sense of wholeness and honesty, and integration. “The Torah of the Lord is perfect”; so begins the account of Torah and *mitzvot* in the psalm (Tehillim 19:8). It concludes, “The judgments of the Lord are true (emet), righteous altogether” (verse 10). There is an emet that derives from the wholeness, integrity, and comprehensiveness of one’s service of God. One sense of “righteous altogether” is objective, external: certain aspects of Halakha, when considered in isolation, seem difficult to understand, yet are cast into an entirely different light when seen as part of the system in its entirety. But “righteous altogether” is also at the level of the subject, of the person performing them; it is emet that derives from the fact that one’s divine service is not simply a series of independent acts, a fragmented world, but rather a comprehensive universe of service.

This factor assumes added significance if we think of divine service in terms of a quest for some inner spiritual self. When Polonius says, “To thine own self be true, and then thou canst not be false to any man” (Hamlet, Act 1, Scene III), that self is presumably a unified and integrated identity. While this quest for some particular, singular self does not occupy as significant a place in our own thinking as in modern European literature, it does manifest in our world as well, for example, in the world of Chassidut.

Now, of course, that quest raises obvious problems, with respect to the subjective aspect of emet, how each individual puts it all together. Emet is monistic, but it is also, within certain limits, pluralistic. The character of one person’s service of God does not necessarily coincide with that of another. Within our quest for emet in the world of divine service, we are confronted with a need to strike a balance between the sincerity of the individual, on the one hand, and, on the other, authenticity to what our tradition views as a legitimate form of avoda. At the extreme, the emphasis upon sincerity leads to the kind of attitude epitomized in Tennyson’s famous lines, “There lies more faith, believe me, in honest doubt than in half the creeds” (In Memoriam, XCVI, st. 3). This, of course, we reject. But, at the same time, surely we ought to beware of going to the other extreme and thinking only in monistic terms. Would anyone today consider delegitimizing either Chassidut or Mitnagdut? The quest for the coincidence of objective and subjective emet, then, is a central aspect of our seeking integrity, integration, and spiritual wholeness, a significant facet of “le-ovdekha be-emet.”

**The Need for Truth in** *Avoda*

Like emet, the term “le-ovdekha” bears a multiple aspect. Broadly speaking, we can address the aspiration for “le-ovdekha be-emet” to at least three distinct realms. On one plane, avoda refers to the totality of one’s commitment to the Almighty and observance of His *mitzvot.* When the Torah says, “You shall fear the Lord your God, and serve Him, and swear by His name” (Devarim 6:13), or if verses in Tehillim counsel, respectively, “Serve the Lord with fear” (2:11), and “Serve the Lord with joy” (100:2), clearly, they are referring to the whole range of the religious life.

But on a second level, Chazal singled out particular foci of avoda. Commenting on the term “to serve Him (le-ovdo)” in the second paragraph of the Shema (Devarim 11:13), the Sifrei (Ekev, 41) offers two alternative referents aside from the obvious one of sacrifices:

“To serve Him”; this is Torah study. And just as the sacrificial order is called service, so too is Torah study called service…. “To serve Him”; this is prayer. And just as the sacrificial order is called service, so too is prayer called service.

For each, the Sifrei cites various proof texts, but does not explain why, indeed, these three elements have been singled out. I believe that the common denominator can be readily perceived. All three entail a relatively direct encounter with the Shekhina, the Divine Presence. Sacrifices are offered in the home base of the Shekhina, and they entail re’iyat panim, appearing before God in His inner sanctum. Tefilla, prayer, is defined halakhically as amida lifnei Ha-melekh, standing before the King. Torah study, quite apart from its intellectual aspect, involves, as the Rav so frequently emphasized, when one is properly motivated, a meeting with the Torah’s Giver.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Whatever was said earlier of the aspiration for le-ovdekha be-emet unquestionably applies to avoda in its broader sense, the totality of one’s service. However, it obviously has special application to the narrower sense, in the areas enumerated in the Sifrei.

“A person who engages in deceit shall not sit in My house; a person who speaks untruths shall have no standing before My eyes” (Tehillim 101:7); so says King David of himself. The more deeply one presumes to enter the domain of Shekhina, the greater the degree of prerequisite probity and authenticity. If physical purification is a condition for entering the Mikdash, then a fortiori spiritual purgation: “One cannot enter the courtyard of the king in sackcloth” (Esther 4:2), whether physical or spiritual.

*Emet* **in Prayer: A Difficult Demand**

The plea of “Ve-taher libbenu le-ovdekha be-emet” is even more acutely relevant with respect to a third realm, the last of the triad of the Sifrei: prayer. In part, this is because the encounter of prayer is more direct than that of sacrifices or Torah study; after all, in great measure we address the Almighty in the second person during prayer. And in part it is because “Ve-taher libbenu le-ovdekha be-emet” can be understood to mean that we ask that the heart be purified not just so as to infuse religious existence generally, but in order that it be able to perform its own indigenous labor, or avoda, particularly. That labor is, of course, tefilla. The heart needs to be pure so that a person should put on tefillin or take lulav and etrog properly, but all the more so in order that the avoda she-balev, the service of the heart, should be proper. In the words of the Gemara:[[14]](#footnote-14) “It has been taught: ‘To love the Lord your God and to serve Him with all your heart’ (Devarim 11:13). What is service of the heart? You must say: Prayer.” But the request for purity of the heart relates especially to prayer because of the particular difficulty we have, if left to our own devices, in attaining truth in tefilla. That difficulty is twofold – inherent in human nature, and also socio-historical.

To begin with the former, the standard of kavvana, proper intent, in tefilla is higher than with respect to *mitzvot* generally. As the Rambam explains: “What is meant by proper intention? That a person should divest himself of all other thoughts and imagine that he is standing before the Shekhina” (Hilkhot Tefilla 4:16). Moreover, the kavvana of tefilla, being more rigorously defined, is, concomitantly, more difficult to attain. The Yerushalmi cites Amoraim who confessed to counting chicks or building blocks in the course of Shemoneh Esrei, while another admitted to meditating upon the niceties of diplomatic protocol.[[15]](#footnote-15) With reference to a much later period, Rav Amital is fond of quoting a story about students of the Ba’al Shem Tov who asked him how they could determine whether a tzaddik who had recently come to the area was genuine or an imposter. “Inquire of him,” the Ba’al Shem Tov suggested, “whether he has a foolproof prescription against aberrant thoughts during tefilla. If he does, you can rest assured he’s a fraud.”

The problem of truth in prayer is further exacerbated by modernity, and this in several respects. For a modern person, the range of genuine relevance of prayer is generally far more limited than it was for his predecessors. As opposed to his ancient or medieval forebears, he feels less in need of divine assistance. The relatively greater degree of control over his environment which science and technology have afforded him has greatly reduced the sense of dependence, which the Maharal placed at the heart of tefilla,[[16]](#footnote-16) and Schleiermacher, after him, at the heart of religion generally.[[17]](#footnote-17) Furthermore, being more secularly oriented, even when he is self-defined as religious, his genuine conviction in the efficacy of prayer is likely to be relatively attenuated. Deep down, he often has a residual sense that perhaps natural law or fortuitous chance govern his life after all. And for many, a pervasive rationalism inhibits the expression of any profound feeling. Matthew Arnold had a sense of modern life as being “a wintry clime” and “an iron time,”[[18]](#footnote-18) and his lament of the evisceration of feeling within it obviously bears upon religious emotion in particular.

The result, within the Jewish world, is often prayer which is pro forma proper and yet passionless; sincere, but, in a very real sense, inauthentic. For the Modern Orthodox Jew and his community in particular, the inclination and the capacity to pray properly and with passion, with a plaintive cri de coeur issuing mi-ma’amakim, from the depths, is often sadly deficient. The essence of tefilla is “prayer of the impoverished when he is faint and pours forth his plea before the Lord” (Tehillim 102:1); but the modern Jew does not generally perceive himself as truly impoverished, and if he did, he probably would still find it difficult to shed his inhibitions and pour forth his plea. Here, surely, is an area with respect to which we need to plead, all the more urgently and passionately, “Ve-taher libbenu le-ovdekha be-emet.”

*Emet* **as a Quality of Our Entire Religious Life**

In order to appreciate fully the import of “le-ovdekha be-emet,” a further point needs to be stressed. “Le-ovdekha be-emet” denotes a qualitative aspect of our religious existence. It does not relate to whether we fulfill the *mitzvot,* or how much we fulfill them, but simply to how we fulfill them. This point is placed in bold relief in a pithy passage in which the Ramban encompasses a good deal of what we have discussed. Rejecting the Rambam’s view that daily tefilla is to be counted as a positive biblical mitzva grounded in the verse “To serve Him with all your heart” (Devarim 11:13), the Ramban contends that tefilla is generally required rabbinically. As to the verse, it is to be understood quite differently:

The essence of the verse “Serve Him with all your heart” is a positive commandment that the whole of our service to the Almighty be with our entire heart, to wit, with proper and complete ­kavvana, for His name (li-shmo), without any kind of interfering thought. Nor should we perform mitzvot without much thought, or to play it safe lest they have some utility, [but rather] as the verse says, “To love the Lord with all your heart, all your soul, and all your might” (Devarim 6:5). (Commentary on Rambam’s Sefer Ha-mitzvot, positive commandment 5)

At the heart of avoda she-balev, the Ramban contends, lies the modality of all *mitzvot,* the mode in which they are experienced and expressed. This point of the qualitative nature of “le-ovdekha be-emet” would be noteworthy at any historical context, but I think it has particular relevance for ours. We live in an age in which yirat Shamayim, fear of God, at least within the Torah world, is often measured quantitatively. With respect to shiurim, measurements, this is literally so; if you accept the measurements of the *Chazon Ish,* you are regarded as more of a ben Torah, but if you rely on Rav Chayim Naeh’s measurements, you are less of a ben Torah. This occurs in other areas as well: how many stringencies do you observe, how many halakhic positions do you take into account in your actual practice? That is the litmus test. Now, to be sure, in many cases there is indeed genuine correlation between true yirat Shamayim and such practices. But the correlation is hardly necessary, and the showy piety of yuhara previously noted might, for some, also be a significant incentive. In any event, we surely need to remind ourselves that the quantitative is not the sole definitive factor, that the key is the Ramban’s prescription, “That the whole of service to the Almighty be with our entire heart, to wit, with proper and complete kavvana, for His name (li-shmo).”

This awareness of the qualitative factor in our avodat Hashem underscores, at the personal level, the relevance of points raised previously regarding what we mean by emet. The specter of various shekarim is not confined to outright heretics or imposters; it relates to us as well. One is not either within the camp of sheker or firmly ensconced within that of emet. There is, rather, a continuum between different levels of each. The dragon of avodat sheker rears its ugly head within the heart of each and every one of us, prompting our universal need for “Ve-taher libbenu le-ovdekha be-emet.”

*Oved* **and** *Eved*

Let us analyze further the meaning of “le-ovdekha.” The root, ayin-beit-dalet, has two referents: oved, meaning one who serves or labors, and eved, meaning a servant or slave. The Maharal emphasized that avodat Hashem, service of God, demands both.[[19]](#footnote-19) Early Christianity, from its inception, contrasted son-ship with servitude, focusing upon the former while rejecting the latter. Judaism, however, has not only accepted, but celebrated, the notion of human – and especially Jewish – bondage to the Almighty, e.g., in the verse, “They are My servants whom I brought out of the land of Egypt” (Vayikra 25:42). That servitude is predicated both upon man’s metaphysical condition and, within the Jewish orbit, upon the Jewish people’s historical circumstances. Regarding “They are My servants,” Rashi says (*ibid.* s.v. Ki), “My letter of indenture takes precedence.”

In no way does this servitude contravene the status of a son or daughter. When the verse asks, “If I am a Father, where is the honor due Me, and if I am a Master, where is the reverence due Me?” (Malakhi 1:6), it does not pose an “either-or” choice, but rather posits a dual relationship. Similarly, after each sounding of the shofar on Rosh Ha-shana, when we present ourselves “whether as sons or as servants,” we shall certainly assume that both relationships are manifest. A Jew says “I am a servant of the Holy One, blessed be He” (Berikh Shemeih prayer[[20]](#footnote-20)) as a mixed expression of ultimate humility and of great pride. Moreover, he senses that it is this servitude to the Almighty that releases him from all other bondage, which makes all other forms of servitude, regardless of their economic or political import, absolutely meaningless. “Rabbi ­Nechunya ben Ha-kaneh said: Whoever takes upon himself the yoke of the Torah, they remove from him the yoke of the government and the yoke of worldly concerns” (Avot 3:5), and this is to be understood not simply as an anticipatory promise, but as a matter of cardinal definition. If he has the yoke of Torah, then, at the ultimate level, there cannot be the yoke of the government and the yoke of worldly concerns. “‘They are My servants,’ but not servants to servants” (Bava Metzia 10a).

Avoda be-emet requires acceptance and attainment of this status and a focus on the true character of one’s relationship to the Almighty. Exceedingly few persons attain it fully. You can count on the fingers of your hand the number of personages in Tanakh who merited to be described as “servant of God” (eved Hashem). The striving, however, is an integral element of our religious existence, incumbent upon every Jew.

Purification

Having outlined the import of “le-ovdekha be-emet,” we turn to examining the tahara, purity, through which we hope to attain it. Halakhically, there are two modes of tahara. The most common mechanism, for both persons and implements,[[21]](#footnote-21) is immersion in a body of water, either a mikve or a ma’ayan: “He shall wash his body with water” (Bemidbar 19:7). For earthenware utensils, however, the Torah has prescribed another mode: “And you shall break the vessel” (Vayikra 11:33). There are utensils so thoroughly suffused with tum’a, impurity, that mere immersion, which cleanses only the surface, cannot purify them. An earthenware vessel, the symbol of pervasive beli’a, of total absorption when it comes to forbidden foodstuffs, can be purified only by being broken down and then reconstituted as a new entity.

When we petition, “Ve-taher libbenu,” purify our hearts, for which tahara do we plead to the Almighty? How do we envision that He shall purify our hearts? From an understandable, human, selfish standpoint, we hope for the purification of tevila, that simple, painless, antiseptic procedure, in which surface cleansing suffices. Near the end of viddui on Yom Kippur we say, “May it be Your will, Lord my God and the God of my fathers, that I sin no more. In Your abundant mercy, clean away, scrape away, the sins I have committed before You, but not through afflictions and illnesses.” Not too deep, not too hard. Tevila will be enough; who wants shevira, to be shattered? But if our tefilla and teshuva are genuine and sincere, if our plea, “Ve-taher libbenu le-ovdekha be-emet,” is, itself, an expression of emet, we must be ready for – nay, we must initiate – the more radical purgation as well.

Jewish tradition never shied away from acknowledging the dual, even contradictory, character of humans and their potential. It was the divine will to create us as complex, multifaceted beings: likened to angels and filled with majesty and grandeur (see Tehillim 8:6), but also “likened to broken earthenware,” as we say in U-netaneh Tokef. The prayer refers to earthenware which is shattered, not only incidentally as it is buffeted by the winds of outrageous fortune, but if need be, intentionally broken, by way of being reconstituted or established anew – of being, if you will, created anew. “The heart knows its own bitterness” (Mishlei 14:10) – there is so much within us for which cosmetic cleansing simply will not do, so much which needs to be melted down and molded anew: our arrogance, our pride, our selfishness, our envy, our shallowness, and our sham. To the extent that we have the honesty, the emet, to recognize the need for reconstruction and reconstitution, painful as such radical processes may be, we pray for them, too.

The Almighty, for His part, has assured us that He is ready to purify us in both modes. One verse teaches, “I will sprinkle purifying water upon you, and you shall be purified; from all your impurities and from all your abominations will I purify you” (Yechezkel 36:25). But the very next verse teaches, “I shall remove the stone heart from your flesh, and give you” – after the ultimate shattering, a reconstitution – “a heart of flesh” (Yechezkel 36:26), one that is vibrant and pulsating. In pleading for “Ve-taher libbenu,” we ask, as the Almighty sees fit, for both modes. We say to Him: You, God, You know what kind of purification – shevira or tahara – we need; You know which mode to exercise and when. We thus turn to You in trust, in faith, and in truth, asking of You, hoping, that whatever tahara is necessary, You will provide it.

“*Ve-taher Libbenu*” **on the High Holidays**

The request of “Ve-taher libbenu” has special import on Rosh Ha-shana and Yom Kippur, beyond that which it has on Shabbat and Festivals throughout the year, a point reflected in the fact that on the High Holidays we accompany the request with an explanation. “Purify our hearts to serve You in truth, for You, O God, are truth,” we say on Rosh Ha-shana, “and Your word is true and endures forever,” a point which explains both why we need the tahara – otherwise how could we, as long as we are impure, engage the God of truth? – and why we turn specifically to the Ribbono shel Olam to enable us to serve Him in truth, because He, after all, is the source of truth.

Beyond the distinction between the High Holidays and Shabbatot and Festivals there may be a further distinction, with respect to the mode of tahara, between Rosh Ha-shana and Yom Kippur. Rosh Ha-shana is a day of creation, “This day, on which was the beginning of Your work, is a memorial for the first day” (Zikhronot prayer), and hence, of re-creation. It is the day of the emergence of a new identity at both the universal level and the personal level, and this creation of a new entity may entail the dismemberment of the previous one. The purification of Rosh Ha-shana is primarily the more radical and painful mode of shevira, befitting a day that, as the Ramban noted, is primarily a Day of Judgment, albeit tinged with compassion.

Yom Kippur, by contrast, is a day of compassion, albeit still within the context of judgment; its mode of purification is that of “Ve-rachatz besaro ba-mayim,” of cleansing through tevila. Thus Mishna Yoma concludes, with reference to Yom Kippur: “Rabbi Akiva said: Happy is your portion, Israel; before whom are you purified, and who purifies you? Your Father in Heaven.”

1. . Excerpted from Harav Aharon Lichtenstein, [*Return and Renewal: Reflections on Teshuva and Spiritual Growth*](https://korenpub.com/products/return-and-renewalhardcover), adapted and edited by Michael S. Berger and Reuven Ziegler (Maggid, 2018). This *sicha* was delivered at Kehillath Jeshurun in Manhattan, Elul 5752 (1992), and was adapted by Michael S. Berger from a transcript by Sholem Hurwitz. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. . Yeshayahu (29:13) poignantly refers to this phenomenon when he says, “And their fear toward Me has been mitzvat anashim melummada, A commandment of men learned by rote.” [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. . *Shabbat* 138b, Keritut 13b. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. . Berakhot 28b. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. . Sefer Ha-ikkarim, p. 18, and even more explicitly in the introduction to the commentary by Gedalya Lipschitz (p. 3). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. . Alfred North Whitehead, Religion in the Making (Cambridge, 1926), passim, but especially in the second lecture, “Religion and Dogma.” [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. . Paul Ricoeur, The Symbolism of Evil (1967), p. 351. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. . See, e.g., Mekhilta (Ba-chodesh, 5), paraphrased by Rashi (Shemot 20:2):

   Why does the verse state, “I am the Lord your God [who took you out of Egypt]”? Because He revealed Himself at the sea as a warrior, as the verse states, “The Lord is a man of war” (Shemot 15:3), and revealed Himself at Mount Sinai as an elder filled with compassion, as the verse states (Shemot 24:10), “And they perceived the God of Israel.” [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. . E.g., Rashi, Mishlei 12:19, s.v. ve-ad; Tur, Choshen Mishpat 1; Beit Yosef, Orach Chayim 36:1. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. . Reflections; or Sentences and Moral Maxims, Maxim 218. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. . Archbishop of Canterbury, 1163 until his assassination in 1170. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. . Pesachim 50b et al. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. . Rabbi Chalafta’s view (Avot 3:6) that the Divine Presence abides among those – whether ten or one – who occupy themselves with Torah embodies this notion well. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. . Ta’anit 2a (cf. Yerushalmi Berakhot 4:1, 29a), based on Sifrei, Ekev 41. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. . Yerushalmi, Berakhot 2:4 (end), 17b. This text, and others, became the basis of rulings by the Rishonim waiving the rigorous standards required according to the Gemara for kavvana in tefilla (see Tur, Orach Chayim 101, s.v. ha-idna, and Rema on Orach Chayim 101:1). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. . Netivot Ha-olam, Netiv Ha-avoda, chap. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. . Friedrich Schleiermacher, The Christian Faith (1821–2), Introduction, definition #3: “The common element in all howsoever diverse expressions of piety, by which these are conjointly distinguished from all other feelings, or, in other words, the self-identical essence of piety, is this: the consciousness of our absolute dependence, or which is the same thing, of our relation to God.” [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. . Matthew Arnold, “Memorial Verses,” 1850. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. . In the early chapters in Netiv Ha-avoda, in Netivot Olam. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. . Based on Zohar, Vayak’hel 206a. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. . Foods do not have such a means of purification. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)