



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

VAYIKRA > Kedoshim

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Kedoshim

**Do You Ever Lie About Your
Weight?**



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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ABSTRACT

Everyone is weight-conscious, especially in this post-Passover period. So this is a good time to ask: What can our weight teach us about our connection with the Creator?

As strange as this question may sound, it is actually in line with this week’s Torah reading which talks about honest weights and measures.

Usually, we associate honesty in dealing with others. Do not steal, do not lie, do not cheat implies do not fool *another person*. But, when it comes to honest weights and measures, another factor comes into play – not fooling *ourselves*. And therein lies the connection between weight and our relationship with God.

We learn from the Talmud that *creating* false weights and measures in business is prohibited, even if they are never put to use. And we learn from Rabbeinu Bechai the reason – by creating false weights and measures we are fooling our own selves.

Stealing from our own selves may be worse than stealing from others – a thief knows he’s a thief, but those who lie to themselves convince themselves that they are telling the truth.

Learning to weigh ourselves honestly is the perfect exercise to get us into tip-top shape.

DISCLAIMER: This sermon alone will not guarantee a significant or noticeable loss of weight. In other words: Results may vary, depending (as with most things) on one’s level of commitment.

DO YOU EVER LIE ABOUT YOUR WEIGHT?

1. Honest Lawyer (Joke)

An investment banker decided to go out on her own. She was shrewd and diligent, so her business grew, and pretty soon she realized that she needed an in-house counsel. So the investment banker began to interview young lawyers.

“As I’m sure you can understand,” she started off with one of the first applicants, “in a business like this, our personal integrity must be beyond question.” She leaned forward. “Mr. DeLacart, are you an honest lawyer?”

“Honest?” replied the lawyer. “Let me tell you something about honest. Why, I’m so honest that when my father lent me \$15,000 for my education, I paid back every single penny the minute I tried my very first case.”

“Impressive. And what sort of case was that?” asked the investment counselor.

The lawyer squirmed in his seat and admitted that it was a lawsuit.

The banker inquired: “What type of lawsuit was it?”

The lawyer hemmed and hawed, and finally mumbled: “Um, well, y’know... my father sued me for the money.”

2. Honesty and Torah

Throughout the history of the world, an uncountable number of classes, talks, and sermons on the evils of dishonest business practice, lying in general, and overall charlatan behavior have been proffered to the masses of humanity. Indeed, right there with the eighth of the Ten Commandments, the Torah commands us, “Thou shall not steal.”¹

¹Exodus 20:13, Deuteronomy 5:17.

But the Torah doesn't leave well enough alone. Indeed, the Torah reading this week offers a whole new level of understanding of this most basic of moral principles – a level that not only teaches how to be honest with *others* but also how to be honest with *ourselves*.

And this seems like a good time to mention something we all lie to ourselves about – our weight.

3. Lying in Weight

What is this strange relationship we have with our weight? So we are a few pounds overweight? So what? Why does this compel us to lie?

Even more perplexing: Why do we lie about our weight to *our own selves*?

We find all sorts of shrewd ways to fool ourselves into believing we really weigh less than the scale says we do:

- “I was wearing heavy shoes...”
- “It was after a big meal...”
- “The floor underneath the scale was uneven...”
- “I was still wet from the shower...”
- “It would be less if I weighed myself in the morning...”

Any of that sound familiar?

And then we supplement this self-foolery with all types of complex hypotheses, intricate reasoning, and even mathematical equations. For example:

- “I walk to my car every morning, which right there burns 1000 calories, so I can have a donut with my coffee.”
- Or: “The zero calorie Diet Coke balances out that third slice of pizza with extra cheese.”
- Or: “Walking up and down the stairs to the kitchen makes up for the pint of ice cream at midnight.”

Those are just a few of many creative delusions each of us here has concocted.

This weight consciousness and self-delusional behavior is especially rampant right now as we emerge from the gluttonous glow of eight days of Passover feasting. All those pounds of matzah, mountains of macaroons, loaves of gefilte fish, and extra thick slices of brisket have certainly caused us all to loosen our collective belts.

Why can't we simply face reality, address the issue, and move on with it? Why do we lie to the world about our weight? Furthermore: Why do we lie to *ourselves* about our weight?

Good question. Before we get to the answer, let's take a look at what the Torah has to say on the subject of weight.

4. Measured Directive

After teaching us such moral and ethical principles as: do not curse a deaf man or trip a blind man, respect your elders, and love strangers, the Torah shares with us this measured directive:

*You shall not commit a perversion of justice with metrics, weights, or measures. You shall have true scales, true weights ... for I am the Lord, your God, Who brought you out of the land of Egypt.*²

Though perhaps it might not have been such a bad idea, the Torah here is not referring to using false scales to weigh yourself, or false measures to convince yourself that you are six inches taller than you really are. So what type of perversion of justice with false weights, measures and scales is the Torah referring to?

The great 11th century Torah commentator, Rashi, clarifies that here the Torah does not refer to judges who sit in courts of law,³ but rather to every single human being in his/her daily life. Whenever we utilize measures, weights, and scales in our interactions with other people,

² Leviticus 19:35-36.

³ For this commandment was already mentioned earlier, at Leviticus 19:15.

we are like judges and in our hands rest the very basics of honesty and righteousness. Thus, says the Torah, *You shall not commit a perversion of justice.*

Rashi expands on this:

If one does not heed this law and does pervert justice by falsifying measurements, then one is called by five negative names: (a) perverse, (b) hated, (c) disgusting, (d) fit for destruction, and (e) an abomination. Furthermore, one causes five negative outcomes: (a) defiling the Land, (b) desecrating the Name of God, (c) driving away the Divine Presence, (d) causing Israel to fall by the sword, and (e) exiling Israel from its Land.⁴

Heavy stuff this!

And there is more:

This mitzvah is stated by the Torah in both the negative and the positive. *You shall not commit a perversion of justice with metrics, weights, or measures.* And: *You shall have true scales, true weights.* Meaning, we are not to make false measures and we are obligated to have true measures. Why?

Why does the Torah place such emphasis on this mitzvah of weights and measures? Why the extreme results and outcomes from such a misdeed? Stealing outright does not have these connotations!⁵

5. The Talmud

The Talmud⁶ hones in on this Torah passage and asks a very simple question:

⁴ See Rashi on Leviticus 19:35.

⁵ Bava Batra 88b, where the Talmud states that falsifying measurements is even worse than promiscuity.

⁶ Bava Metzia 61b.

Why is this mention of false weights and measure so important? We already know from the Ten Commandments that stealing is prohibited? Since the Torah never repeats itself without teaching us something new, if we already know that stealing and cheating is prohibited why does it have to mention it here again with regard to weights and measures (and in both the positive and negative)?

The Talmud answers that the Torah is coming to teach us something very unique. And that is this:

Usually, the prohibition of stealing is directly tied to the *act* itself – if you relieve someone of his possessions and cause a loss, then you are guilty and culpable. If, however, you merely have the intention to steal or just possess the tools of a thief without actually using them, then you are not guilty.

With these laws of weights and measures, however, the prohibition isn't only against using false weights and measures but against even making them.

But who really cares if some guy has false scales, weights and rulers collecting dust in his basement if he never uses them to cheat anyone? He has done no harm, so why should this matter?

6. Rabbeinu Bechai⁷

The 13th century Torah commentator from Spain, Rabbi Bachya ben Asher ibn Chalava, better known as Rabbeinu Bechai, addresses this question and provides a very relevant and personal answer, one that gives us a very keen insight into human psychology.

He cites a passage from the Book of Proverbs where King Solomon juxtaposes two interesting statements. *Who will say, 'I have refined my heart; I have become purified of my sin'? False weights and false measures – both are an abomination before the Lord.*⁸

⁷ On the verse (vol. 2, p. 64, Warsaw 1879). See also Likkutei Sichot vol. 27, pp. 149.

⁸ Proverbs 20:9.

Rabbeinu Bechai then goes on to explain:

We should never think that we have it all figured out and that we are perfect specimens, for our heart can always be more refined and we can always be more pure. We are human, and so we are subjective and imperfect. And nowhere is this more apparent than in how we deal with weights and measures. This is one area where we could always use improvement.

Says Rabbeinu Bechai:

With the prohibition of false weights and measure the Torah is teaching us (not so much how to deal with *other* people ethically and righteously, for that was addressed before, but rather) how to deal with *ourselves* in a just and righteous manner. Making and possessing false weights and measures is not a prohibition against cheating someone *else* but rather against cheating our *own* self!

This is why we are prohibited from making or owning such implements, even if we never use them to cheat anyone.⁹ The Torah here is teaching us how not to falsely deal with *ourselves*, how not to lie to, steal from, or fool *ourselves*.

This also explains another anomaly – the prohibition against stealing begins with a *shava pruta*, a small unit of value but a unit of value nonetheless. With false measurements, however, the prohibition is in effect even to a minuscule degree, even less than a *shava pruta*.

7. Chofetz Chaim Story (Optional)

Just how important is this “miniscule degree” can be seen from the following story told about Rabbi Israel Meier Kagan – better known as the Chofetz Chaim – who lived at the turn of the 19th century in Radin, Poland.

⁹ See Rambam Hilchot Geneivah 7:3.

The Chofetz Chaim owned a general store in Radin and every day he would inspect his weights and measures to make sure that they were perfectly accurate and honest. Once he noticed that there was something wrong with the little scoop that was used to measure out salt. Rabbi Kagan felt uneasy, for whoever bought salt that day might have received a bit less than he or she had paid for.

After checking, he discovered that there had been only one purchaser of salt that day, and this was a non-Jewish woman from a neighboring village. No one knew her name or exactly where she lived.

Unable to rest until he compensated her for the missing measure, Rabbi Kagan took a sack of salt to the neighboring village and went from house to house, distributing salt to every family, as this was the only way he knew to ensure that this unknown woman was compensated as well.¹⁰

8. The Issue

Why such a big deal (or should I say, “miniscule deal”)?

The issue isn’t so much how much we take from someone else (although that is very important to be sure) but what we are doing to ourselves.

When dealing with our own weight and measures no amount is too little, because it is not about monetary loss (which is quantitative) but about being a deceitful and dishonest person (which is qualitative). With regard to being a charlatan and liar, a miniscule lie is no less a lie than a giant lie.

Indeed, maybe it is even worse.

Here is the psychological – and practical – difference between a straight-up thief (if there is such a thing), and a deceitful false measurer.

¹⁰ *The Taryag Mitzvos* by Rabbi A.Y. Kahan, pp. 170-171.

With regard to a classic thief, one and only one desire is in play: the thief desires to steal something from another. There is no doubt or uncertainty – a thief is a thief is a thief. And for this, the Torah has prohibitions and consequences and safeguards, in order to protect *other* people from the thief.

With false measures, however, two diametrically opposing things are happening at once:

- 1) On the one hand, there is the measurement aspect – the show of placing an item on the scale – which implies dealing with another in a measured and scaled and fair manner, and not desiring to rip him off like a thief.
- 2) On the other hand, this scale is unbalanced – these are *false* measures! – which means that the very means of ensuring an honest business interaction are used to cheat another person.

This isn't merely stealing money; this is corrupting the very integrity of human interaction. This isn't merely cheating some poor victim out of a few dollars; this is cheating your own self (and the rest of the world) out of a greater *ideal*. This is lying to yourself, convincing yourself that you are dealing ethically when you are not.

This is why the Torah prohibits even the making or possessing of false measures – even if in actuality they will never be used to steal from another: The Torah here is trying to counteract not merely the dishonest person, but the dishonest *personality*. The Torah is not just trying to protect *another* person from being cheated, it is trying to protect the dishonest person from cheating *himself*.

9. Self-Deception

When dealing with our own selves, each of us generally knows when and how much we are honest with ourselves, and when and how much we are not. But sometimes we fool ourselves so completely that we convince ourselves that we are not fooling ourselves.

This kind of self-deception is the nature of the beast – our “dark side” – what the Torah calls our *yetzer hara*, our evil inclination.¹¹ Our *yetzer hara* doesn’t just tell us to lie, cheat, steal, be dishonest and untruthful; no, it fools us into convincing ourselves we are being righteous and true.

It says: “Sure, create measures, create weights, create metrics, create scales – but in such a way that you will have the advantage. Nah, it’s not cheating, it’s not even a penny per pound. And don’t worry, with the extra money you make, you will give more to charity and you will be a good, righteous person.”¹²

The *yetzer hara* applies this shrewd – but skewed – logic to our own personal characteristics and attributes, and it is more than a coincidence that the Hebrew word for characteristics/attributes is *midot*, meaning literally “measures.” The *yetzer hara* unbalances our personal scales by telling us:

“You are a righteous person, you are holy, you are ethical. Who cares if at the same time you also have a part of you that is a little lighter here, a little heavier there. It’s no big deal if you make the weighty significant things a little lighter. If in your private closet or basement – deep in your own heart where no one else sees – you have a scale that’s not exact or a measure that’s not accurate, who will be hurt, who will be affected?”

Know that this is not your divine soul talking. For, if something is not exactly balanced in your own self, than *you* will be affected and you *will* be hurt.

It’s one thing to know and acknowledge that we did something wrong. “Okay, I did it, it’s done, let’s clean up the mess.” But when we are delusional and think that what we are doing is righteous, that’s much harder to correct.

This also applies to our self-deception when it comes to our own weight. We convince ourselves that one cookie will not really affect our weight. But it is not true. If in the *physical* sense one tiny cookie will make a difference, how much more so when it comes to our spiritual selves – one tiny, seemingly worthless self-deception can affect us in colossal ways.

¹¹ Genesis 8:21.

¹² See Likkutei Sichot *ibid*.

And this is why the Torah states this mitzvah in both the negative and the positive, telling us *not* to create these false delusions and to know exactly what we are measuring and how.

10. In Conclusion: Overweight Judaism

There is a prevalent theory rumbling around out there. When a man and woman are about to get married, God designates three hundred pounds to the couple, and God tells them to divide it however they see fit (or unfit). Then, after twenty years of marriage, God gives them an additional fifty pounds to portion as they so choose.

As with all humor, there is some truth to this. Perhaps, with tongue-in-cheek, we might say that the Creator of the world gives us a certain amount of weight in our lives, a certain amount of gravitas, a certain amount of sheer mass – and God allows us the free-will ability to distribute this weight as we see fit.

Spiritual (and physical) health and fitness is recognizing where to distribute this weight and where not to. Do I leave all my weight on my body, or do I dedicate some to my soul? Do I fool myself into believing that which is really heavy and important is only light and whimsical? Do I place too much emphasis and weight on inconsequential things and not enough on the things that are really essential?

Like a good marriage, the balance between our weights, measures and scales essentially depend on how true we are to *ourselves*. An honest and truthful person will only make honest and truthful calculations. And vice versa: false weights and measure in a person's possession – even unused – indicates a false sense of self and the presence of delusional ideas and ideals.

This, my friends, is the two-sided meaning of this mitzvah:

In our lives we *must not* be false to ourselves, allowing ourselves to create and possess false measures. And the antidote to this is the positive – we *must* create righteous and true measures in our lives, which will express our righteous and true selves.

As Shakespeare put it so famously:

This above all: to thine own self be true,
And it must follow, as the night the day,
Thou canst not then be false to any man.¹³

If you do this, the next time you step on the scale, instead of screaming in horror, you will shout out in delight!

I would like to conclude with a disclaimer. This sermon alone will not guarantee a significant loss of weight. In other words: results may vary depending, as with most things, on your level of work and commitment!

Shabbat Shalom and may we carry the freedom and transcendence of Passover into the entire year!

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¹³ *Hamlet*, Act 1, Scene 3 (Polonius speaking to his son, Laertes).