



Scrupulous Leadership • Parshat Emor

I've always loved the word "scrupulous," even though it can be a mouthful to pronounce. It offers the subtle combination of meticulousness, thorough attention to details, and the moral quality of avoiding wrongdoing in the smallest of ways. It communicates the nexus of careful, intentional thought and deed in relationship with honesty, integrity, and righteousness. It describes leadership at its best. Sadly, we don't expect our leaders to be scrupulous today when it comes to the ethics. We've lowered the bar so much that some leaders step right over it.

Our parsha, *Emor*, demands that the priestly class, in particular, be very careful about their conduct, especially when it comes to managing donations to the Temple: "God spoke to Moses, saying: Instruct Aaron and his sons to be scrupulous (*va'yinazru*) about the sacred donations that the Israelite people consecrate to Me, lest they profane My holy name..." (Lev. 22:1-2).

Rashi explains that the root of fastidious care – *nezer* – means to distance oneself or set oneself apart. He uses two biblical prooftexts to support his explanation from both Ezekiel 14:7 Isaiah 1:41. We recognize this word from the nazir, the ascetic who refrains from certain behaviors to live a less worldly existence. He sets himself apart. *Nezer* also refers to a crown around the head; the nazirite does not cut his hair, perhaps to bring attention to the role the mind plays in self-sanctification.

One passage in the Talmud explains that scrupulous behavior was also expected of those who collected funds for the *Beit Ha-Mikdash*, our holy Temple, to cover the cost of offerings. The coin gatherer was not allowed to wear clothing with cuffs. He was also not allowed to wear shoes, sandals, *tefillin*, or amulets, all places where coins might be hidden from view. Having authority and exposure to a lot of money can tempt even the most scrupulous. Avoid suspicion and take every precaution not to arouse it. The Talmudic passage concludes with a verse from Proverbs: "Find favor and approval in the eyes of God and humans" (Prov. 3:4).

Speaking of endings, our chapter in *Emor* ends where it begins: "You shall faithfully observe My commandments: I am. You shall not profane My holy name, that I may be sanctified in the midst of the Israelite people—I, God, who sanctify you, I who brought you out of the land of Egypt to be your God, I, the Lord" (Lev. 22:31-33). It's not easy to know what it means to sanctify God's name and not profane it. It might all come down to one question: does every small action of ours reflect uprightness?

Leadership expert Dan McCarthy challenged readers to think hard about this question. In his article "Leadership Scruples: What Would You Do? 20 Ethical Dilemmas for Leaders" (*Great Leaders*, Jan. 28, 2009), McCarthy resurrected the game Scruples to ask leaders how they would

handle different scenarios. Here are just 5 of his 20 questions:

1. Your manager congratulates you for a brilliant suggestion and hints at a promotion. Your employee gave you the idea. Do you mention this to the manager?
2. A colleague is out of his office. You notice his paycheck stub on his desk. Do you glance at it?
3. Your manager demands to know what a co-worker is saying behind his back. It's not flattering. Do you tell him?
4. You want to quit a job without notice but you need a good reference from your employer. Do you invent a family health emergency?
5. You decide not to hire someone because he's wearing a nose ring. When he asks why he didn't make it, do you give the real reason?

We can add lots of questions to McCarthy's list. There are the big questions about leadership scrupulousness like, "Am I honest in what I say and do? Do I use language that hurts or heals? Do I curse or gossip too much about colleagues?" And then there are the smaller but no less important

questions that are the modern-day version of the coin-free charity collector's clothing: "Do I take office supplies for personal use without asking permission or checking on the company's policy?"

At the heart of scrupulous behavior is the understanding that small acts of misconduct can grow over time into larger acts of moral corruption and small acts of honesty can grow a reputation of trust. Who would you hire, the person who takes paperclips home or the person who asks before taking something for personal use? I know my answer.

Our Torah reading this week puts another frame on these questions: godliness. Sanctification opens our chapter and closes it. If you want to strengthen your relationship with God, care about the details. If you want to strengthen a relationship with others, care about the details. If you want to strengthen your leadership, care about the details. All of the small details add up to a reputation of love, integrity, goodness, warmth and depth.

In his book *Morality*, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks explains that, "Bad behaviour can easily become contagious, but so can good behaviour, and it usually wins out in the long run."

So, how scrupulous are you?