

My name is Roger Zimmerman, and I am grateful to the KB community for the space to share these thoughts on this day.

Growing up in a slightly more traditional Jewish environment, I was struck by the evident hypocrisy surrounding the High Holidays: that you could somehow wash away sins for an entire year by a few days of trying hard to be inscribed in the "book of life". The notion that you would compensate for a year full of failings with 10 days (really only 2 or 3 days) of reflection, prayer and asking forgiveness seemed, well, to put it mildly, absurd! No wonder people had to invent a supernatural judge to grant this forgiveness.

Of course, a more worldly, humanist theme crept in to the tradition and liturgy, and modern Jews now emphasize that we should seek forgiveness from those that we have hurt. But even this seems not quite right to me. Not that we shouldn't do this. Certainly, just being honest with ourselves and those we may have harmed is an essential part of repairing our lives. But, the act of repentance is clearly not enough; it must be important to live ethically on a regular basis, not just during these days of reflection and renewal.

So, what can we do during the rest of the year to improve our selves and our world? Hasn't the rhythm of our lives provided many of us with at least a part of the answer to this question? Almost every day, we go to work (including work at home) or school (including informal, self-directed education). Perhaps it is there we should focus our energies.

Now, it is common to see these endeavors as, at best amoral. They are things that we "must do" in order to survive or to "get ahead" in the modern world. In this view, they are a necessary means to the end of morality, but do not have ethical import by themselves. But I, personally, reject that notion. I think that work and study are essential to our humanity and therefore - depending on how we practice them - can be a powerful force for good.

And, there is a rich Jewish tradition of respect for study and work. The Talmudic Rabbis mention the value of work in many dimensions, both

as being good for the laborer and good for the world. This tradition was transmitted to me by mother, lovingly and repeatedly, during those long lazy weeks between when I graduated from college and when I got my first job.

But, what is about these daily activities that offer the opportunity to do good? Obviously, there are some careers and some fields of study where the potential positive impact on our fellow humans is direct. But, we can't all be teachers, cancer researchers or ER physicians. What about those of us who manage an office, who construct buildings, who write software, who sell things to people? What about the many of us who just go to school? Are we just bound to view these activities as separate from our ethical existence? I think not.

In fact, I believe that morality is not primarily concerned with how we treat other people. We all have choices we face constantly concerning how to behave, and we would face these choices even if we were alone on a desert island. In that situation, those choices would affect whether we live or die. And certainly, there must be value in acting in a way that allows us to live. In the real world, those same choices exist, and they affect - in a very real sense - the quality and value of our lives. I believe it is central to Humanist and Modern Jewish philosophy that living a fulfilling life is an end in itself.

And it is difficult to make these choices correctly. Living life every day is a challenge; doing our work and our studies well is hard. And we belittle our lives if we do not give ourselves credit for facing those challenges squarely and overcoming them. I believe there are some virtues which we can practice - which we can choose to practice - in the course of our every day activities, which, if we integrate them into our core, will help us achieve positive transformation for ourselves, and for the world at large. I would summarize these virtuous behaviors as: Rationality, Integrity, and Productiveness.

Rationality is the virtue of not faking reality. It is a recognition that there is a truth that is knowable to our minds. It does not mean that we are infallible or omniscient. Nor that we should suppress our feelings, as these undeniably have a reality in themselves. Instead,

rationality is achieved when we sincerely try to understand the nature of our world through logic and awareness, questioning and experiment; and when we analyze and reevaluate our feelings in light of new evidence and new understanding.

And, rationality means holding ourselves to an exacting standard of truth. In my experience as a scientist I am challenged by this choice every day. There is always a temptation to accept positive results - to see the answer that I was hoping for - based on little or subtly skewed evidence. It is enormously difficult to uphold Einstein's ideal: He said (and I'm paraphrasing): "I have no interest at all in being right. I only wish to know whether I am or not". What saints we would be if we could live up to this ideal each day! But, in fact, it's the only thing that actually works.

Integrity is having the courage of our rationally-derived convictions; and being willing to act on them. It means saying "I disagree" when appropriate: not necessarily getting into a fight with your boss or teacher - though that may be necessary in some circumstances; but, certainly, drawing our own line between right and wrong, between truth and falsehood, to the best of our ability; and constantly refining that line as we integrate new evidence. Now, I trust I'm not going out on a limb here. Integrity is hardly controversial as a virtue. But, I am emphasizing the non-social aspect of integrity, which is closely related to rationality. When we act against the evidence as we see it, which is all too easy to do in this world, it serves to destroy us little by little, day by day. Denying the conclusions of our minds is a big step toward denying our own reality.

Productiveness is a virtue because we must recognize that surviving and thriving depends on certain kinds of action. We are not ghosts and we must provide the means of our existence. But neither is mere existence a sufficient goal, not in my understanding of Humanism. The objective is to build a life that is worth living, one that enables pursuit of as wide a range of values as possible, including the values of joy and happiness. In my view, doing our jobs well, serves this noble end. There is no necessary dichotomy between our material and spiritual aspirations.

Now, I have stressed the individualist aspect of these virtues. But, clearly each has social implications, and I don't think there is an inherent conflict between practicing these virtues for our own benefit and the positive impact these can have on others. First of all, I personally am inspired when I see the achievement of my fellow human beings in these areas. I trust many of us are. But, I also believe that we have a shared societal interest in practicing these virtues: we can advance science, we can improve our understanding of the world; we can create wealth so that human suffering can be alleviated and so that more people can live lives of dignity.

That is my tentative answer to the demands of this day. Reflection on the past only goes so far. It is a necessary but not sufficient step in the process of renewal. I prefer to set my sights forward to the coming months, and to the things which will need to be done for many hours of each day of those months. I hope I am up to the task.