In the yeshiva it is “Elul Zman,” a mini-semester preceding the Days of Awe. Learning includes reflection on our uniquely individual roles in the unfolding of Creation. Where do we begin? It is vital to start by recalling that Judaism is a “Torat Chaim,” a living law. It seeks not to distance a life of spiritual commitment from the secular world, but to engage the mundane and sanctify it. We are commanded to bring Sinai everywhere we go. Therefore, our introspection has to start with looking at the most basic behaviors we engage in.

The Talmud reminds us in no uncertain terms that, while Yom Kippur atones for infractions against God, only humans can forgive each other for the damaging behavior between people. God can wipe our slates clean for acts we committed that distanced us from Him, but for acts that distance us from each other — those conversations, and pleadings, are between us. Yom Kippur only does its purifying work of forgiving our moral and behavioral debts in the cases of wronging another person only after our reaching out, and reconciliation has begun [Yoma 85b]. We therefore have to begin our teshuvah (repentance) during the Elul Zman, identifying the areas where the Torah advises us to be most vigilant in our relations with each other.

This week’s parsha gives us a clue as to a primary way we can frame an effort at sustaining the best of interpersonal behavior. The Torah instructs us to use honest weights and measures in our commercial transactions [Deuteronomy 25:13-16], warning of fraud and commercial transgressions. The Talmud takes this commandment to avoid false weights and measures to be more important than violations between us and God [Mishneh Torah Hilkhot Genaiva 7:12 regarding Bava Batra 88b]. Apparently, one cannot rely on teshuvah at all when cheating another person because, as Rashi comments, the fraudulent businessperson may not know to which customer the dishonest sale was made. If an object can’t be returned, and the victim cannot therefore be made as whole as possible again, teshuvah is unavailable [Bava Batra 88b]. Maimonides goes so far as to state in no uncertain terms that the individual who breaks the law of honest weights and measures is at the same time thereby denying the Exodus from Egypt, the foundation of Torah itself.

If one digs a little deeper at the wording of the Talmud linking corrupt business behavior with the impossibility of repentance, one recognizes the tremendous human empowerment granted by the Mishna [Yoma 85b], leaving us to correct our interpersonal violations. In the realm of sheer human fellowship, not only is the choice ours, but the consequences are ours as well. Those choices seem to lay outside the traditional realms of formal religious behavior. The Torah has clearly selected an example of hopelessly bad behavior that could only occur in an environment of commerce, where it is especially easy to forget God and His Law. In so doing, the halachic demand to work towards teshuvah during this calendar period poses a challenge during the Elul Zman.
The challenge is a fundamental metric of a spiritual life; can we — do we — really bring our faith with us wherever we go? It is easier to remember to keep the ritual commandments. They are concrete and physical. But commandments pertaining to the non-ritual sphere of civil and commercial law are harder to sometimes recall because they are often situational, less tangible, and seemingly more abstract. They require an unswerving, sustained homage to ethics. No wonder then that “measures” are called middot in Hebrew, which also means virtues, and indicates what we might call in American parlance “character.” How good are we at taking our “middot” into the world at large?

Will we choose harmful behaviors in our “secular” lives from which it is impossible to return? Or, will we be as honest as the Torah and Talmud ask us to be? Rashi says that dishonesty in the commercial realm could bring about a tragic historic consequence, such as the attack by Amalek, arch enemy of the Jewish people [Deut. 25:17]. Corruption alienates those around us.

Maimonides reminds us [Mishneh Torah Hilkhhot Teshuvah 5:1] that the essence of being human is the ability to choose. Our parsha teaches us during this Elul Zman that we can make or break our futures by the way we decide to treat each other. It really is that simple. 

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