

**A Person of Torah**  
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Beth Shir Sholom

In his book Zen Judaism, David M. Bader sites these parables:

- Accept misfortune as a blessing. Do not wish for perfect health, or a life without problems. What would you talk about?
  
- The Tao does not speak. The Tao does not blame. The Tao does not take sides. The Tao has no expectations. The Tao demands nothing of others. The Tao is not Jewish.
  
- Breathe in. Breathe out. Breathe in. Breathe out. Forget this and attaining Enlightenment will be the least of your problems.
  
- The Torah says, Love your neighbor as yourself. The Buddha says, There is no self. So, maybe we're off the hook.

The way in which I was first introduced to the road to Jewish Zen enlightenment as taught by David M. Bader was via the internet. I was sent these and other wonderful, creative quips as an email – without attribution to Mr. Bader. Fortunately, I was able to trace them to the author because I was aware of another book of his, “Haikus for Jews.” If you enjoy David M. Bader’s humor, I encourage you to *purchase his books*. If you receive other, wonderful bits of poetry, prose, philosophy and insight without attribution through an email, write back to the person who sent it and ask who wrote it. The sender may not know because it was sent to him/her the same unaccredited way. If you forward the email without checking the source, the result is your participation in an infinite chain that re-enforces the anonymity of a writer who does not wish to be anonymous. You are also participating in potential plagiarism, the stealing of intellectual property. If you’re going to forward the email or quote it in any other way use search engines first to try to find the author. In doing so, you will be upholding an important Jewish value known as “B’sheym Omro,” which literally means, “in the name of the

one who spoke it.” In the Talmud, a verse from the book of Esther is quoted to demonstrate that saying something in the name of its originator or teacher is a crucial part of the essence of what it is to be a Jew. You’ll remember that Esther doesn’t reveal herself as a Jew to King Achashveyrosh until the climax of the story. However, early on, she makes certain to honor her uncle Mordechai when she relates something he said to the king. She may not be known as a Jew yet, but she’s acting like one.

To say something *Besheym Omro*, in the name of the person who wrote or said it, is sited in Pirke Avot, the Wisdom of the Sages, the collective sayings of the rabbis that is more-or-less their ethical will to us. There, this value is placed as the crowning component of being a “person of Torah.” To be a person of Torah requires forty-eight qualifications. A note of comfort, I will not list all forty-eight this evening. Still even the Reader’s Digest version of what it is to be a “person of Torah,” to be a Jew, is daunting. Among the qualifications, according to the beautiful translation by my colleague Rabbi Rami Shapiro, are:

“Learning, attention, clarity of mind and tongue, an intuitive heart, awe, reverence, humility, joy, simplicity...  
 friendship with colleagues, challenging students,  
 calm deliberation,  
 ... balance in business...  
 avoiding gossip, maintaining humor, being slow to anger, with a gentle heart...  
 guarding one’s words,  
 not claiming merit for oneself, being loved,  
 ...humanity, charity, and reproof, not seeking out honors,  
 not boasting of one’s education, being loath to judge,  
 sharing the burdens of others, giving people the benefit of doubt,  
 leading others to truth and to peace...  
 asking probing questions,  
 answering queries honestly, listening and discussing,  
 learning in order to teach and practice, honing one’s teacher’s wisdom with questions...”

And, lastly:

“giving credit to those from whom one learned.”

For, the text goes on:

“Whoever credits a teaching to its author brings redemption to the world.”

Giving credit to the person from whom one learned brings redemption to the world! Like a toggle switch! Clap on clap off! All we have to do is give credit to those who said something or wrote something or taught something and the world is saved! No war, no hunger, no economic crises. No economy at all! No Messiah needed! This is great! The original “Easy Button!”

One of MY teachers, Rabbi, Professor Leonard Kravitz (yes, rock and roll fans – a very different Lenny Kravitz), used to say that no law is created unless it is already broken. In other words, all law is reactive. All law is a response to things that are already happening. As a result, if we look back at the text from our tradition that defines a person of Torah, we must assume that our rabbis saw that there were those who were doing the **opposite** of the things on the list of forty-eight qualities on their list. For example:

- They did not ask probing questions; in fact, sometimes they accepted things presented as facts without any challenge at all.
- They did not answer questions honestly, distinguishing clearly and readily between fact and opinion. They made themselves deaf to the views of others and were not open to discussing complex moral issues. Instead they gave rash, superficial and simplistic answers.
- They disrespected the process of learning by not challenging their students or their teachers.
- They had a different set of ethics for business than they did for other areas of their lives.
- They gossiped.
- They were quick to respond in anger with words that were not well-chosen and often hurtful.
- They were quick to judge others for faults of which they, themselves, were guilty.

- They dismissed as impossible, idealistic (and therefore not worthy of their time) the task of filling the world with truth and peace.
- They caused incalculable damage when they passed along as truths thoughts and perspective whose authors they could not cite and/or whose actuality they had not bothered to verify.

Does this sound like any group of people we may know? Does this sound like us? Reframing this traditional text as a list of damning indictments may feel harsh but it fits in precisely with the purpose for these High Holy Days, these days of awe and trepidation. Pronouncing the list in the negative tells us that Jews should not, **must** not, behave in like manner. We are forbidden to give simplistic answers, to disrespect others or to have a double moral standard so that we can be ruthless in business. We are mandated to ask questions about what we are taught or told. We are mandated to form our opinions based on respectful discussion with those with whom we both agree **and** disagree. Before we come to quick conclusions that may be based upon misinformation or naiveté that lead us into armed conflict or economic crisis, we Jews must remind ourselves, that the purpose of Jewish decision is to make a contribution to a world that is truthful and peaceful.

Naming the sources from which a person learned so that those who are the recipients of the teaching can judge the veracity of what is being taught for themselves is the crowning quality of a person of Torah, the quality that brings redemption to the world, because without it, the integrity of a Jew is torn asunder. Every other aspect of Jewish life becomes suspect if one does not willingly and openly create a chain of responsibility and credit for what one teaches. Judaism considers each one of us teachers. Everything we share, everything we say is planted in the person or people who hear us. If the actuality of what we put forth as fact is ever untrustworthy, if what we say is not clearly footnoted and its sources revealed, than every other aspect of our Jewish being and our humanity loses its reliability. In regard to this, we haven't really advanced much, or perhaps at all, from our ancient ancestors who received much of what they knew through word of mouth. We have merely updated and intensified "word of mouth" through emails and websites. We are seduced into being convinced that just because we see something in digital print it must be true! We

are seduced into being convinced that if something is said often enough and loudly enough in sound bites or talking points or on a blog or on YouTube, it must be true! In the digital age, a person of Torah minimally asks, “Who wrote this? Who said this? What is the purpose of this teaching? Does it respect me as a learner?” Let us recall that one of the qualities of a person of Torah is to not declare merit for oneself and boast of one’s knowledge or ability. How then should we respond to an email that proclaims its own transcendent value when it threatens us in its preamble: “If you do not ever forward anything else, please forward this to all your contacts...this is very scary to think of what lies ahead of us here in our own United States...better heed this and pray about it and share it...” A person of Torah asks a great many questions about an email like this, especially an email that presupposes that our reaction to what we are about to read will be fear. A person of Torah, a Jew, knows that the **most** respectful response (and, in this case, the most patriotic response) to an email like this is to see how it stands up to scrutiny and examination. As persons of Torah, as Jews, we know that we learn in order to teach and do; we learn in order to create and disseminate truth and peace. A person of Torah knows that to push the forward button on our computer when an email makes us afraid means that we are ready to take responsibility for what the email says and we are ready to fan the flames of fear not merely in everyone we know, but everyone who is known by our email contacts, and everyone who is known by them and-so-on and-so-on.

According to a Chassidic story (based on *Midrash Rabbah* VI:14), trying to rectify the spreading of unsubstantiated fear is like trying to collect all the feathers from a pillow after they have been scattered on a windy day.

What if we did forward some fear-provoking emails during the primaries and since whose content we trusted because the email came from a friend and we know that neither the friend nor we bothered to check into the roots of those emails? What if we now find that what was said in those emails was written to be purposefully misleading and destructive, disempowering and fear-provoking? What if we now realize that some Jews and others are prepared to vote in response to those fears and some have been frightened into not voting at all? We can’t pick up all the feathers, can we? Just because the feathers have been scattered about, doesn’t mean it is impossible to gather up some of them. Our tradition tells us that while we are not expected to complete

all the work (of our lives), neither are we free to desist from doing it. We have a lot of work to do.

At this time of the year, when we confess our wrongdoings, we NEVER do it individually. We always do it publicly, together as a community. We confess everything because, as Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel taught us, "In a free society...some are guilty; all are responsible." It is the responsibility of every Jew, every person of Torah, to clean up this mess, whether we participated in spreading these uncorroborated fears or not!

Together we will take responsibility for our fears and our courage, feather by feather, vote by vote – and we must all vote. We will vote as "persons of Torah," taking into the voting booth EVERY quality that implies. Nothing in that list of qualities tells us to be afraid. In fact, a person of Torah views the world exactly the way Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav viewed it, as a narrow bridge on which we have no choice but to not be afraid – at all – and walk forward! Persons of Torah do not vote based on anti-Semitic emails that prostitute the Jewish community through lies about a candidate's religion and by pushing buttons in us designed to bring to life our ultimate post-Holocaust and post 9/11 fears. California persons of Torah do not vote based on irrational and dehumanizing fears about those of us who are gay or lesbian. California persons of Torah do not fear the angry tirades of those who interpret America's values in a manner demanding that we punish and endanger a pregnant teenager rather than protect her.

It doesn't end with the voting. That is only when the next stage of being persons of Torah begins. After the election, speaking for ourselves, not letting anyone dictate what our positions must be, we will, relentlessly, take ourselves into the public arena. We will check our sources and give credit to our teachers. We will speak with others with "clarity of mind and tongue," with "intuitive hearts," with "calm deliberation," with "probing questions" and without spreading innuendo, fear and lies. We will do what Jews have always done and is our self-declared purpose in being a people – we will change the world by leading ourselves and others to "truth and peace." Amen

Shrimp, prop 8 – denying the full humanity of another person, taking responsibility for what you're NOT saying,

A vote is a simple response that should be the result of the detailed work of talking, listening and discussing. The internet gives us simple answers for complex issues from sources we don't even know. Earlier in the year, the Jewish community was particularly targeted with emails purposefully designed to stir up our post-Holocaust fears. We received these emails from trusted friends so we assumed that what was in them was fact. I encourage you to use any of many sources for confirmation or discrediting available on the web like Snopes.com.

This isn't the Messiah or even God that is being defined here, this is a definition of what it is to be a Jew, each one of us, any of us, in America, in the world. A life based on Torah, a life based on a set of mandated actions that in turn are based on a set of values that are seen as intrinsic to life itself – that is a Jewish life. Let us not confuse this with a life of Judaism, for that is only the symbolic realm of ritual and prayer. Obviously ritual and prayer have their purpose, otherwise we wouldn't be here. A Jewish life, the articulation and contribution of our perspective and value system into a world in need of constant upkeep and repair, that is something that ritual and prayer can inspire but not accomplish.

Let's add something to the text from our tradition I quoted earlier. Let's extrapolate backwards into the text, into the definition of what it is to be a person of Torah, a Jew. It is not just the trait of giving credit to those from whom one learned that brings redemption to the world. It is ALL of these traits.

I'm not going to tell any of us how to vote. I am telling us how not to vote. We will not vote out of fear. There is not much difference between those who employ Jewish fears for their own political purposes and the Jews who respond to those fears and then forward the fear to all the people they know.

It is no secret that in this community of Beth Shir Sholom, most of you probably agree with the message in this sermon. And that is not why I am delivering this message today. I am delivering this message because of feathers. Let me explain.

Some of us may be familiar with the Chassidic story based on a section (VI:14) in *Midrash Rabbah*, the great compendium of folkloric interpretation of the Torah, that tells of a man who was truly repentant for gossiping, for spreading rumors without knowing their source. He went to his rabbi and said, "I truly repent of the gossip mongering I did. Please tell me how I can repair the damage I caused." The rabbi responded, "I can't help you." The man was astounded, "But, Rabbi," he pleaded, "You don't understand. I am truly sorry for my actions. I was wrong and I want to make it right!" "I still can't help you," said the rabbi. The man would not relent; he continued to implore the rabbi for some method to correct his wrongdoing. Finally, the rabbi said, "Go home and bring me a feather pillow and a knife." Confused, the man did as he was told. When he returned, the rabbi instructed him, "Now, take the knife, slit the pillow open and shake out the feathers in the wind." Still confused, the man followed the rabbi's directive. The feathers flew all around, carried by the wind. "Go collect all the feathers," said the rabbi. "That's impossible!" the man screamed, "They're everywhere." "So it is with your gossiping. You cannot truly retrieve your words **once** someone has heard them."

And so it is with the damage done by this email and others like it. Some Jews are prepared to vote in response to the fears evoked by the lies in the email. Some have been frightened into not voting at all. Just because the feathers have been scattered about, doesn't mean it is impossible to gather up some of them. We have a lot of work to do. It is the responsibility of *every* Jew, whether we participated in spreading this rumor or not, to clean up this mess! We must go to all our Jewish colleagues, friends and family and tell them these lies are based on an article published by those whose purposes for eliciting Jewish fears have nothing to do with what is good for the Jewish people. If we are told to "forward" what we have learned to honor those who have given us healthy, constructive, empowering teachings because it will bring

redemption to the world, how much the more so, must we reveal the true roots of unhealthy, destructive and disempowering teachings! Together we will take responsibility for our fears and our courage, feather by feather, vote by vote – and we must all vote. It doesn't end with the voting. There is still a great deal to do after the election. Speaking for ourselves, not letting anyone speak for us or create innuendo for us, we will relentlessly take ourselves into the public arena and we will be "persons of Torah." With "clarity of mind and tongue," with "awe, reverence, humility and joy," with "calm deliberation," with "probing questions," we will do what Jews have always done and is our self-declared purpose in a being a people – we will change the world by leading ourselves and others to "truth and peace" – for that is the only redemption there is. Amen