

Rosh Hashanah Morning 5772—September 29, 2011
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A mild-mannered author writes a gripping memoir about his struggles with addiction, it hardly stands out from the dozens of books just like it until Oprah gets a hold of it, that is.

Oprah dubbed its author James Frey, “The man who kept her up at night,” and selected *A Million Little Pieces* for her wildly popular book club, instantly catapulting it to the top of the *New York Times* bestseller list for a record fifteen straight weeks, selling nearly four million copies—the only problem is, Frey lied. His nonfiction memoir about his days as a criminal and junkie was fabricated. He simply made up events and experiences that never happened. He lied.

Frey is hardly the first writer to stretch the truth. Remember Janet Cooke, the Washington Post journalist who was made famous by her riveting story “Jimmy’s World” about an eight year old heroin addict? The story swept the nation and Cooke won a Pulitzer Prize—there wasn’t a shred of truth to it. She lied.

It’s not just writers who seem to have a passing acquaintance with the truth. Remember the balloon boy—the six year old who was carried off by a large balloon in Colorado, leaving his parents a wreck, fearing for his life? TV networks cut away from a speech by the President to cover it.

Finally the balloon deflated and slowly fell to earth. Millions watching on TV breathed a sigh of relief only to find that the balloon was empty. Where was the boy? Had he fallen to his death? Had he somehow escaped? No. He was hiding in his parents’ attic. The entire episode was a stunt orchestrated by his parents to gain publicity. Countless conversations with law enforcement and rescue teams, nationally televised interviews and pleas for their son’s safe return—all lies.

Famous people from congressmen to senators, even presidents, have looked the American people straight in the eye and lied.

We all know how important it is to tell the truth. It’s one of the first lessons we’re taught as children and one of the Ten Commandments.

So why do we lie to the person who really matters the most—why do we lie to ourselves?

When we say we'll exercise more and eat better, and know we won't, we're lying to ourselves.

When we think or say we don't have a problem but know we do, we're lying to ourselves.

When we go to the doctor and withhold information about our habits, we're lying to ourselves.

When we tell ourselves we can afford something, even though we can't, we're lying to ourselves.

When we pretend we're happy, we're lying to ourselves.

As some of you know, I'm getting married in a few months. Recently I was measured for a new tuxedo. There's something humbling about those huge dressing rooms with that giant three-way mirror. Standing there alone, waiting for the tailor, surrounded by mirrors that reveal sides of myself I don't recognize; angles and perspectives I rarely see or analyze. "Is this what I actually look like to the world?" I wonder.

The older we get, the harder it is to look at ourselves in the mirror—to *really* look at ourselves. With each passing year we recognize the face looking back at us less and less. Whose wrinkles are those? Whose pores? Whose bags under the eyes? That grey hair that seems to multiply overnight is my father's—not mine. So we try not to look too closely, to cover up, to conceal, to spackle with potions and lotions galore. It's hard to really, really look at ourselves.

It takes courage to face ourselves. It takes faith to face ourselves.

But Self-scrutiny is what today is really all about. Because the rabbis knew that being honest, truly honest with ourselves, has the power to change us in a way that nothing else can.

"I used to tell people about how I worked day and night 'making a life and a future for my family,'" Matthew Clarke, shares in a recent interview. "I'd get up at 5:00 AM, head to the office and come home for dinner – then head back to work until midnight and repeat this six days a week. After a while, it was easier to skip dinner and just stay at work," he recalls.

"In the course of living that schedule, I was lucky if I saw my wife or kids

for more than a few minutes a day, but that was okay because I spent all day Sunday with my family – I'd spend the day with them—thinking about work.

I lived, thought and dreamed work. It was so bad that every conversation with my wife was about work. When she talked to me about our kids going to the doctor, things that they were doing at school, the schedule for the next week, I would respond with 'okay.'

It was another late night at the office when I felt it—a shooting pain in my left arm, the next thing I remember, I was laying in the back of an ambulance. All I could think about was my family. I couldn't even remember the last time I tucked my daughter into bed or kissed my wife before I left for work. What if I never got another chance? All these years I told myself I was a good husband and father because I provided for my family, but I forgot that time is just as precious as money. My priorities were completely backwards. I said that I was working my tail off for my wife and kids – but I was neglecting them along the way—it took a heart attack to show me that. Lying in that ambulance that night—I decided I had to make a change. I realized I only have one shot to get it right and I don't want to waste another day.”

It took a heart attack for Matthew to be honest, truly honest with himself. What will it take for us?

Workaholics or not, we all deceive ourselves—we all misrepresent ourselves sometimes. A chat with a friend about the responsibilities we have a work, the title of a past job on a resume, half-truths in our online profiles. Sure, we all misrepresent ourselves from time to time, which is bad enough. But when we misrepresent ourselves to ourselves, it's even worse.

After all, if we think about it, really think about it, we know the truth about ourselves.

What role do we play in our dysfunctional relationship with our in-laws, in our children not calling, in our marriages, in our contentious relationship with our boss? What role do we play in our own unhappiness?

It's liberating to be honest with ourselves. It's liberating to stop pretending to be someone or something we're not. There is a peace that comes with accepting who we are.

Are we that brave? Do we have that kind of courage—the courage to face ourselves, who we are, who we really are, or will we wait for our heart attack?

***Teshuvah*, the work of bettering ourselves that the High Holy Days are all about, takes courage. It cannot happen unless we're honest, truly honest with ourselves. We can't just show up on Yom Kippur and expect it to happen for us—we have to start today. After all, this is the one time of year it really is all about us.**

This is a time to be completely self-centered. We're supposed to focus on our lives, our marriages, our children, our behavior. We can't wait until Yom Kippur to face ourselves, to be honest with ourselves—we have to start right now.

These next ten days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are a gift, it's up to each and every one of us to use them—to make the most of them.

The High Holy Days are that giant three-way mirror in the dressing room—the mirror that God, that the Torah, that our tradition put in front of us and behind us every year. Let this be the year we have the courage to look into the mirror of our lives and be honest with ourselves, to really look, to really see. To really make amends with the truth of our lives, so that the New Year will truly be a *Shanah Tova*...a year of truth, redemption and love. *Shanah Tova*.