



*Parshat Va'era--Rosh Hodesh*  
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**What Lance Armstrong's Transparent Insincerity Teaches Us about Us**  
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Lance Armstrong. What do we make of the continuing saga of Lance Armstrong, the most celebrated cycling champion in history who won the Tour de France a record seven times; the cancer survivor who founded Livestrong and raised millions of dollars for cancer research and advocacy; and the subject of an exhaustive investigation by the United States Anti-Doping Agency that had compiled mounds of evidence that he had doped and cheated while winning his races. As you may remember, this agency stripped Armstrong of his 7 Tour de France titles and of his bronze medal in the Olympics, and it decreed that he could not compete in athletic competition in the future. While deciding not to contest the charges, Armstrong continued to insist that he did not cheat, that he never cheated, and that he was the victim of a witch hunt and personal vendetta—a position that he has taken, *sworn to*, consistently, *for more than 10 years*.

That is why the story in last Saturday's New York Times, page one, above the fold, was so shocking:

*Lance Armstrong, who this fall was stripped of his seven Tour de France titles for doping and barred for life from competing in all Olympic sports, has told associates and antidoping officials that he is considering publicly admitting that he used banned performance-enhancing drugs and blood transfusions during his cycling career...He would do this...because he wants to persuade antidoping officials to restore his eligibility so he can resume his athletic career.*

Wow! There is insincerity, and there is *transparent* insincerity. This is *transparent insincerity* the likes of which I've never seen. This is what Lance Armstrong is saying: I will confess to you now that the reason I would confess to habitual cheating and doping throughout

my cycling career--which I had always under oath denied--is so that you will lift the punishment and let me compete again.

I don't know what the antidoping authorities will do in response, but the sheer audacity of this calculated confession has made me wonder: what would our sources have to say now about Lance Armstrong? He is proposing to do the right thing—confessing—for the wrong reason—so that he can compete again. Is it okay in Judaism to do the right thing for the wrong reason, or does our tradition insist that we do the right thing for the right reason?

At first blush, we might think that Jewish sources would frown upon this confession motivated by an agenda. After all, Rashi in a comment in the tractate Sanhedrin tells us: *rachmanah ba'ei libah*. God wants our heart. If God wants our heart, that suggests a certain principle and purity. That we do the right thing for the right reason.

I was thinking about this lofty teaching when reading a review by Doris Donnelly in the Wall Street Journal about the cleric behind Les Mis. You will remember that Jean Valjean has served his 19 years for stealing a loaf of bread; he finally gets out of jail, but with his criminal record, he is unable to secure work, lodging, or food. He becomes homeless and hopeless, when the cleric, Monseigneur Bienvenue, sees him, welcomes him, brings him into his modest home, and feeds him. We see Jean Valjean—a super lean Hugh Jackman, eating food rapaciously, like he hasn't seen a warm meal in a long time, which he hasn't. And then, when the kindly cleric goes to sleep, Jean Valjean repays this kindness by looting the home of several pieces of silver, and stealing away with this treasure into the dark of night. When Jean Valjean is apprehended by the authorities, and returned to the cleric, the cleric tells the authorities that these silver pieces were not stolen at all; they were a gift; in fact, here are two more silver candlesticks I had

intended to give Jean Valjean. This singular act of grace not only saves Jean Valjean from the authorities in that moment; it saves, and shapes the trajectory of, his life.

In her discussion of this heroic church figure, Doris Donnelly describes him this way: his “center of gravity was a compassionate God attuned to the sound of suffering.” Monseigneur Bienvenue epitomizes the ideal, doing the right thing for the right reason, lavishing the love of God on a broken world because he is suffused by that very love.

*Rachmanah baei libah.* God wants our heart. Saying I will confess if you won’t punish me anymore seems a far cry from the heart that God wants.

And yet. Who is like that in the real world? Who among us is so pure? Monseigneur Bienvenue is a fictional character, a figment of Victor Hugo’s imagination. Most of us, including most clerics, are not like that. In fact, as Doris Donnelly points out, Victor Hugo created such a perfect character as a standing reproach to the real, imperfect, flawed clergy who lived in 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe.

God might want our heart, but that heart comes with a messy, complicated, textured humanity to which none of us is immune.

Perhaps that is why the Talmud also teaches: *leolam yaasok adam beTorah u’vemitzvah afilu sheloh lishmah.* A person should study Torah, or do a mitzvah, even if there is an ulterior agenda. Doing the right thing for the wrong reason is okay, and we all do it in different ways. We attend the big community dinner for some organization because somebody has bought a table and invited us, and we feel pressured to attend. It’s a “got to do” not a “want to do.” We support our alma mater because we hope that doing so will help our kid get in. We attend somebody else’s daughter’s wedding when our own daughter is still not married with mixed emotions. We see the bride walk down the aisle, and we are happy for her, but we cannot stop ourselves from

wondering: Will our own daughter's day ever come? Monseigneur Bievenue had perfect motives. But real people have real motives. That is why Jewish tradition privileges the deed, *what* we do, and not *why* we do it. We are at the community dinner. We write the check. We dance at the wedding. That's what matters. Maybe lovelier feelings will come; maybe they won't. But in the meantime, do the right thing—even if not for the right reason.

In fact, the deeds we do have the power to transform us *while we do them*. *mitoch sheloh lishmah bah lishmah*, we start doing it *not* for the right reason, but we ourselves change, and we start to do it for the right reason. We submit to the community dinner because somebody bought a table and we felt we had to go—but then we find ourselves inspired by the evening, and we start to do work for the cause. We go to somebody else's daughter's wedding thinking about our own unmarried daughter, but once we get there, we find ourselves getting into the spirit and actually being glad that we are there, and feeling truly connected to the nachus of somebody else.

Perhaps Lance Armstrong could begin his journey towards respectability on the basis of a calculated confession, but if he were required to speak against drug use, to convert his story of shame to a cautionary tale, his story could help clean up the sport and in the process clean his own self. Many of his former teammates feel genuine remorse at having used illegal substances; that is why they confessed to the authorities. *Mitoch sheloh lishmah bah lishmah*, he confesses only because he wants to compete again, but he grows into a genuine awareness that doping was wrong and dangerous.

Perhaps. Perhaps not. Who knows? The truth is, this question is so much bigger than Lance Armstrong. This question is about all of us. At stake in the conversation is: how do we judge those people in our lives, namely just about everybody, who is real, who is not as pure as the cleric in Les Mis, who is flawed, who has mixed motives. How do we judge the people in

our lives who disappoint us, who let us down. And how shall we ourselves be judged when we let people down, when we are not pure, when we do the right thing for the wrong reason, or when we don't do the right thing at all?

On the one hand, we need to maintain standards, *midat hadin*, the measure of strict justice. Lance doped. He's out. He's done. Any other result means the sport is not serious. When we mess up, when our loved ones mess up, there must be a serious consequence. Otherwise we are not serious.

On the other hand, we need to flex. To be generous. To temper justice with mercy, for all of us are flawed and finite. *Midat harachamim*, the measure of compassion.

Even God struggles with this tension. The Talmud imagines that every single day God moves from the throne of justice, *kiseh hadin*, to the throne of mercy, *kiseh harachamim*. From insisting upon standards to being generous in the face of human frailty. From judgment to forgiveness. Always in motion. Always in play. Why doesn't God just pick a throne and sit there? Pick justice. Or pick mercy. Why go from one throne to the other, never at home in either.

Because it is not only Lance Armstrong who will need a second chance. Shabbat shalom.