

Tyranny of the Should

How to free yourself from the destructive, incessant pressure to be perfect.

Rabbi Dov Heller, M.A.

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Everyone lives with “shoulds.” One might say Judaism is a way of life built on shoulds, such as, one should love others, one should keep kosher, one should give charity. For many, their shoulds are experienced as positive and fulfilling. Meeting ones moral obligations is a great source of pleasure. When we do the right thing, we feel good about ourselves and feel that life has meaning and purpose.

But there are others who do not experience shoulds in a positive way. They feel pressured and strangled by them. For such people, their inner shoulds are sources of great emotional suffering. Dr. Karen Horney named this experience, the “tyranny of the should.”

Here are some examples of shoulds that can become problematic:

I should always feel happy

I should not dislike anyone

I should feel strong and in control

I should have perfect clarity

I should always be giving

I should not make mistakes

I should never get angry

I should never waste time

I should always feel productive

(I invite you to make your own list of should)

Shoulds become tyrannical when they are experienced as making impossible demands that are impossible to meet. “You should never be weak,” is an impossible demand to meet. The “tyranny of the should” is experienced as a demand to be perfect and therefore feels like an order given by an oppressive dictator who ruthlessly demands perfection and nothing less. Shoulds are rigid, unyielding, and devoid of compassion for ones limitations and weaknesses. One is never able to relax because the pressure to be perfect is unrelenting

When the shoulds are reinforced by social pressure they become even more unbearable. Under the burden of these dictates, one's behavior may become pressured, forced, and may take on an obsessive quality. The hallmark of the experience of one controlled by the tyranny of the should is that one feels driven but never feels like the driver of his life. There is a loss of personal agency, genuine creativity, and authenticity.

If this isn't enough, shoulds are also experienced as punitive. Every should carries an implicit message that, "If you don't do it perfectly, you are a bad person." Thus feeling like a failure, one inevitably falls prey to self-hate and shame. A person who loathes himself feels depressed, hopeless, sapped of vitality.

Thankfully there is hope.

The first step is to become aware of your shoulds. Make your list. When you begin to become aware of them, you will discover just how many there are, some obvious and others quite subtle. So listen very carefully.

The second step is to recognize that some shoulds are lies. For example, I might hear myself say that I should always feel happy. Is this true or false? It is certainly a lie, because it is not humanly possible to be happy all the time and never be in a bad mood.

The third step is to identify the truth. In this example, the truth would be, "It is ok to feel unhappy and be in a bad mood from time to time. No one is happy all the time." Upon embracing the truth, you will feel a perceptible shift; a sense of liberation and a feeling of lightness.

The fourth step is to recognize that you are not a bad person. Just because I am not happy all the time doesn't mean I'm a bad person, that something is wrong with me, or I have a psychological problem; to think so is a falsehood.

The fifth step is to accept yourself as a good person who is imperfect and limited. No longer needing to be perfect, one can begin to discover and embrace the truth about oneself. Living as an imperfect, limited and messy human being requires letting go of one's idealized self-image. Embracing reality is often painful.

Becoming more grounded in one's own true feelings and perceptions is a primary indication that one has begun to free himself from the "tyranny of the should." As the grip of this reign of terror loosens, one begins to feel more alive, becoming the driver of his life and no longer the driven one.