

Back in the days when one could walk into a doctor's office and be seen within a relatively short time, there was a neighborhood physician who would charge \$10 for an initial office visit but only \$5 for subsequent visits to treat the same condition. One clever fellow, trying to save himself some money, blurted out as he entered the doctor's examining room, "here I am again to see you for the same problem you treated me for last week." "In that case," replied the doctor, "just continue for the time being with the same treatment I prescribed for you then."

So here we are again, seeking not a treatment for our physical maladies but rather a healing of the spirit. Here we are again, only **we're** not pretending. This **is** a return visit, an annual ritual. I've lost track of how many Yom Kippurs I've observed since I first became aware of and attuned to the significance of the day. And the truth is I sometimes find myself discouraged, not so much at being here again (we all need a Yom Kippur at yearly intervals) but at being here again pondering the **same** failures and shortcomings. I find myself wondering whether the prescribed treatment of confession, acknowledgment of my sins, reconciliation with those whom I've hurt, fasting and contrition, and resolute determination to avoid the same transgressions in the future has been effective and has changed me for the better over the years. I always begin the High Holiday season with lofty intentions to do better in the coming year but invariably fall back into the old ways in short order. I tell myself when I stumble that I am "a work in progress." I feel shame and regret for past words and deeds, and I know that I am really a better person than that, that the person who spoke or acted in an insensitive or offensive manner isn't really the "me" that I want to be. But in my discouragement I wonder whether real change or progress is possible for us, whether we're capable of becoming or at least more closely approximating the better selves that we wish to be.

Have I changed over the years, and has it been for the better? It's difficult for me to judge because I'm too close to the subject. It's like looking at oneself in the mirror every day and not being able to tell a difference in the way we look from one day to the next; and yet from the vantage point of a longer interval of time, we can readily see that our appearance now is not the same as, say, when our school yearbook picture was taken. Appearances change as the years go by. And I know that some of my priorities have changed too. What I used to regard as important doesn't matter to me as much any more,

and other things have taken their place. Attitudes change as well, and I may be more open now to experiences I would not have considered in years gone by, what my friends call leaving one's "comfort zone." But in the all-important matter of moral striving which this season encourages, of trying to be the best person I can be in my relationships with others and with God, I'm not sure whether and to what extent the cumulative effect of so many Yom Kippurs has changed me, and I'm all the less certain regarding the changes that are possible between one Day of Atonement and the next.

I am a collector of Jewish stories, and I love nothing more than re-telling these tales (narratives that usually contain a moral or a lesson) at our monthly young people's service. I am also delighted when I come across a story that I had not heard before. Recently I was pleased to find in Seymour Rossel's volume *The Essential Jewish Stories* a brief anecdote about a Chasidic rebbe that spoke directly to my sense of uncertainty and discouragement when I contemplate the difficulties we experience in trying to change ourselves.

The rebbe was weeping, and his students could not understand why. So they asked. "When I set out to serve as a rabbi", he replied, "I thought I could change the entire world, but the world had different ideas and was not easily changed or perfected. So I turned my attention to my own small corner of the world. I tried to change my own community, focused my efforts on my congregation and on the yeshiva where I taught. But there too I was not as successful as I wished to be. My students and my congregants did not change to the degree I wanted them to. We did not become the perfect scholars of Torah and servants of God. So as I entered middle age, I decided that I would concentrate on my family, would change them so that we would become the perfect family. But perfection within the circle of family is not to be found. I grew old and came to the realization that the only person I could really change was myself, and yet here too I have not been able to change as I have wanted, to become the person I want to be. "But rabbi," the students protested, "you shouldn't be sad. Only God is perfect. And you have excelled as much as is humanly possible in faith, in service of your fellow persons. You are known as a *tzaddik*, a righteous man, and your fame has spread far and wide." "You don't understand", the rebbe interrupted. "I'm not at all sad. My tears are tears of joy, of thankfulness for what God has given me. I have tried and tried again to change others and

to change myself. And despite all of my failures, God has blessed me with the strength and with the will to try and to keep on trying.”

Here we are again, once more seeking spiritual healing, troubled perhaps by the same issues as vexed us last year, perhaps the same faults and shortcomings we haven't yet succeeded in ridding ourselves of. Because we've been here before, we know what we have to do. The Tradition speaks to us loud and clear from the pages of the holiday prayer book and from the countless sermons we've heard over the years. We won't have to pay a physician, neither for an initial visit nor a subsequent one, but the endeavor – to atone, to overcome our estrangement from God and each other, to change ourselves, and to move into the New Year with a clean slate – will be costly in other ways, in terms of spiritual and emotional energy and the resources of will we will have to summon. How wonderful it is that we are here, that we want to try to change, and, as the rebbe taught his students, what a sign that is of a special grace!

In order to change, we will first need to hold up a mirror to ourselves, not to look at our physical features, but to examine our hearts and souls, our traits of character. Taking an honest and close look at ourselves is not an easy thing to do. That's why there is a well-nigh universal human inclination to blame others for any situations of conflict or tension we find ourselves in, to project our own faults onto someone else, to minimize our own misdeeds or to try to excuse them with lame and flimsy justifications (“it's no big deal” or “everyone else is doing it”) – all to avoid seeing ourselves as we truly are. We may not like what we discover, when we engage in honest self-examination, but doing so is a prerequisite for atonement, for change and for healing.

Another inclination against which we must struggle is procrastination, which like projection and rationalization, seems an innate part of our human makeup. Doing good, performing mitzvot, fulfilling our religious obligations requires time, effort, energy, sacrifice of our personal comfort and convenience. It's so tempting to say, “I'll get around to doing it later.” From personal experience I can tell you that with every good intention I've ever had, every resolution I've drawn up, every program of self-improvement I've wanted to embark on – I have found a way of postponing its implementation. I'll wait until after Yom Kippur, until the new secular year, or until after

I return from my vacation. And unfortunately later all too often becomes never. The sage Hillel was right, “if not now, when?”

Because we are, each of us, unique individuals, the circumstances, the nature and the details of our transgressions are likewise unique. Our sins, moreover, are confessed in the privacy of our communion with God during the silent *Amidah*, so that they remain known to us and us alone. That is as it should be; the goal should be personal change and not inflicting shame. When we participate in the congregational repetition of the *Ashamnu* and the *Al Chet*, we do so as members of the community, taking on a measure of responsibility (**not guilt**) for the moral climate of the collective, confessing sins that you or I may never have committed but that are included in the text because someone in the community may possibly have done so. The public recitation thus implies nothing about us personally.

All of which necessitates that I frame my remarks in broad and general terms. Jewish ethics distinguishes two categories of mitzvot, two distinct sets of duties and obligations – those between a person and God and those between us and our fellow persons – and consequently, two different kinds of transgressions.

We sin against others when we use or exploit them for our own ends, when we fail to respect their dignity, when we diminish their sense of self-worth, and when we betray the trust they place in us. It is especially important at this season to examine our behavior in the context of family, for we often act with more sensitivity, kindness and solicitousness toward total strangers than toward the loved ones whom we take for granted. Judaism concerns itself not just with the synagogue and its rituals but also with the home and the marketplace and all that transpires there.

When we speak of sins against God, traditional Judaism has a more clear-cut and definitive notion than those of us who take a more relaxed view of ritual observance. For the traditionalist, violating the Sabbath or dietary laws or failing to fulfill a mitzvah such as praying at the appointed times, hearing the sound of the *shofar* on Rosh Hashanah, or afflicting ourselves on Yom Kippur are *aveirot*, transgressions. I have a somewhat different take on the matter. For me, the sin lies not so much in the neglect of a particular ritual commandment or the transgression of a religious taboo as in our ignorance of an ancient and noble heritage, rich in wisdom and capable of enabling us to experience a

sense of the Divine, ignorance, moreover, that could be easily remedied by reading and by participating in adult education. Our sin is the all too easy assumption that Judaism has nothing more profound to say to us than what we learned in Sunday School and Hebrew School during our pre-teen years and the notion that because some rituals or beliefs handed down by Jewish tradition offend our modern sensibilities that we are off the hook and can reject the entire package. Tradition is not a matter of all or nothing; it is meant to be studied, reinterpreted and wrestled with, re-shaped and re-fashioned by successive generations of a living community.

A different kind of sin against God is our failure to appreciate and make wise use of God's gifts to us. Attending to our physical and mental health is not only something we do for ourselves; it is a commandment of the Torah rooted in the idea that our life comes from God and is the most precious of Divine gifts and blessings. I have much to atone for in this regard. Time also is a gift of God, and we all know that it is a finite resource, all too often squandered on what is frivolous and without purpose or meaning.

Perfection is unattainable and change is difficult, discouragingly so at times. It is hard to cast off old habits, to break out of familiar patterns. But there have been enough examples about which I have read or heard to convince me that change is indeed possible. There have been Jews, raised in assimilated homes and with little knowledge of Judaism, who became *ba'alei teshuva*, centering their lives on the study and observance of Jewish tradition. Franz Rosenzweig, the German-Jewish philosopher of the early 20th century, will always serve for me as the outstanding example. On the verge of converting out of Judaism, he was so moved by the experience of attending Yom Kippur services in an Orthodox synagogue in Berlin that he decided to remain a Jew. He later wrote a masterpiece of Jewish religious thought, sparked a renaissance of Jewish learning in his hometown of Frankfurt, and (because he had fallen ill and become confined to his residence) gathered his own minyan that met at his home each Shabbat morning.

A different story of change concerns a young man in a Midwestern community, who was active in the Ku Klux Klan and neo-Nazi movements and was responsible for numerous acts of racial intimidation. When a cantor at one of the local synagogues received a threatening phone call from the young man, he decided to reach out to him in friendship and challenge his white supremacist and anti-Semitic beliefs. The result, as

related in a book *Not by the Sword*, was that the young man resigned from the Klan, repudiated his hateful past, and became a spokesperson for tolerance and interfaith understanding. The book describes this not only as a change but a transformation.

Hatred for those of different racial or religious background can be all-consuming, can become an addiction which distorts our view of reality and is impervious to reasoned argument. But there are all kinds of addictions with which individuals struggle. I know that I am inspired by those who, through will-power and often with the help of a strong religious faith and the encouragement of a support group, have overcome alcohol or substance addiction. They are examples for me of the possibility of personal change.

The rebbe in our story despaired of changing his community and turned his attention to family and self. But even societal change is possible, as witness, for example, the gains made in my lifetime by the civil rights movement and the women's movement. Not that we've attained perfection and not that the struggle for what is just and fair can ever be abandoned. It takes exceptional individuals who have the courage to defy convention to advocate for justice. But communities have been changed for the better in the past and can be changed again in the future.

Yom Kippur means acknowledging the need for change and attending to it without delay or procrastination. We may initially feel discouraged that we're here again, seeking to atone for the same shortcomings, resolving to change the same things about ourselves as the last time around. But let us remember what the rebbe told his students – the willingness to try is a blessing. For me, it's even more. Being willing to try means we are truly alive. *Zochreinu l'chayim*. May we be remembered for life.