

The *rebbe* appeared to be dozing off at the Kiddush table, and the *chasidim* took advantage of the opportunity to congratulate themselves on what a fine and distinguished spiritual leader they had and to celebrate his virtues. “He is the most learned Torah scholar in the entire country,” one declared. “Not only that, but he is meticulous in the observance of the *mitzvot*,” said another. “And,” offered a third, “he is generous to a fault and gives away almost everything he has to *tzedakah*; no one cares more about the poor and needy in the community.” After a few minutes, there was a lull in the conversation, and the *rebbe*, lifting his head from the table and opening his eyes, coyly inquired, “*Nu*, and about my great humility you have nothing to say?”

We do know that there is such a thing as false modesty, that people will affect a pose, a demeanor of humility, while their innermost thoughts and feelings are anything but humble. Yom Kippur calls on us not only to recite prayers that reflect a sense of humility and an awareness of our shortcomings, but to actually feel those emotions and acknowledge the truth of what we are saying. Not false modesty but genuine humility is the order of the day.

Judaism has both a theology of atonement and a protocol of the steps we must take to attain it, the first of which is acknowledging our sinfulness and relinquishing the excuses and rationalizations we employ to justify our transgressions. Note that I do not shy away from the word “sin”. I don’t believe that someone is literally keeping score of our virtues and our transgressions or that we will be punished for our sins by suffering or adversity either in this world or in the hereafter. I do, however, believe that there is a moral order in the universe and that right and wrong are more than a question of subjective, personal preference. When we rebel against that order, when we exploit, oppress, hurt or abuse a fellow human being, deny them what is rightfully theirs, or disrespect them in any way, we have committed a sin. When we fail to appreciate our lives as a gift or to experience our world with a sense of awe and wonder, when we neglect the spiritual dimension of our existence, or when we view ourselves in isolation from our communities, from humankind, and from the interconnected web of life on this planet and the resources that support it, it is a transgression of a different order but nonetheless a sin that we have committed.

And yes, we are all maestros of rationalization – it’s no big deal, nobody got hurt, everybody else does it, he or she had it coming to them. I’m not sure how often we succeed in

convincing ourselves or in relieving our lingering sense of guilt. But wrong is still wrong. Rationalize as we may, we are, all of us, flawed human beings. Or in the more elegant language of Ecclesiastes, “there is not one righteous person on earth who does only good and does not err.”

None of us, I would wager, is guilty of the more weighty transgressions – murder, armed robbery, physical assault- that might land us behind bars. And ritual observances and norms, the neglect or violation of which would constitute a transgression for Orthodox Jews, are for most of us outside of that camp a matter of personal autonomy. But that still leaves a vast domain related to interpersonal relations and social ethics wherein our flaws and shortcomings are exposed and which we would do well to ponder. The formulaic confessions found in our holiday prayer book – the *al chet* and the *Ashamnu* – are an exhaustive catalogue of human wrongdoing, but I would like to offer up my own list of the ways in which we fall short and transgress, some of which overlap with and reiterate the standard liturgy and some of which supplement it.

We sin when we lack the courage to speak forthrightly and to stand up for what we believe is right. No one wants to lose friends or acquire a reputation for self-righteous and overzealous moralizing. We do, however, need to heed the words of Edmund Burke – that all that is necessary for evil to triumph in the world is for good people to do nothing to protest. When we are apathetic or indifferent to what happens in our community, our nation and our world, we negate the concept of a common humanity united in kinship through our Creator.

Our Sages tell us that the character of an individual is evidenced (among other ways) in *ka'aso*, the nature of his anger. Are we quick to anger? Do we lose our temper with minimal justification over matters that are trivial? Or do we reserve anger for matters of true consequence? The Sages generally condemn anger as an undesirable trait that clouds our judgment, and they equate it (somewhat cryptically, I confess) to the sin of idolatry. Certainly when a person uses anger as a means of bullying others and intimidating them for his own ends, that constitutes a grave sin.

Many items that appear in the prayer book's lists relate to speech, the unique capacity by which humans are distinguished from the animal world and through which we can do either vast good or vast harm. Anger is at times vented through the uttering of hurtful words, often directed at those whom we profess to love. The closeness and intimacy of family enables us to act toward

our dear ones in ways we would not dare to behave toward total strangers. Hurtful speech also embraces other categories – gossip, talebearing and defamation as well as the mockery and belittling of others. Shaming a fellow person publicly is considered by the Sages as an especially heinous sin. And although gossip is something in which we all indulge – a delicious vice, unfortunately, Jewish moralists have devoted entire treatises to censuring it and expounding on its harmful consequences to the speaker, the willing audience, and the victim alike.

We sin when we display pettiness and spite and when, refusing to allow bygones to be bygones, we hold on to grudges for years on end and resist the path of forgiveness and reconciliation. I have seen families (including the families of my own parents) as well as communities come to grief over the bearing of grudges, and I long ago reached the conclusion that it the grudge-bearer, the individual who won't let go of the past, who suffers more than the target of his or her anger and bitterness.

We sin when we betray the trust of others, disclosing matters that were intended to remain confidential or failing to fulfill our responsibilities when others were depending on us. We sin likewise when we violate boundaries and impose unreasonably on the privacy, the time and the good will of others. And we sin, when, out of indolence or boredom, we devote less than the best effort of which we are capable to the performance of our chosen tasks.

When I returned from the Hadar yeshiva seminar that I attended in New York this past March, I shared with congregants at a joint Shabbat eve service what I had learned from the yeshiva's dean Rabbi Shai Held, to wit, that the "heart of Torah" is the capacity to open ourselves to the pain, the need and the suffering of others and to do so in a manner that renders us personally vulnerable. We come to realize that adversity and pain are not just something that happens to others but that they could befall us as well, sharing as we do in the human condition. It is, as Rabbi Held emphasized, not an easy thing to do. In recalling Rabbi Held's words, I thought of the Chasidic master who told his students that he had learned the true meaning of love, when he overheard the conversation between two peasants in a tavern. The one, perhaps somewhat intoxicated, professed his great love for his friend, to which the other replied, "You say that you love me, but do you know what pains me?" "No," replied the first peasant, "I don't." "How then can you claim to love me," retorted the other, "if you do not know what pains me?"

When we hold ourselves aloof from others, fail to be present for them in their time of need, and remain unaware and uninterested in the reason for their pain, we are guilty of a sin of omission.

Over the next twenty-four hours I will be focusing in my own prayers on some of these behaviors that I've noted and on the thoughts and emotions underlying them, resolving to do better in the coming year. Some of what I've presented may strike you as overly idealistic or naïve. We can't, after all, be present for every individual whom we encounter who is in pain or in need, and we will all experience moments of burnout when we lack the energy or drive to summon up our best and we have to function on autopilot. And we will, despite the best of intentions and the most resolute of efforts, succumb on occasion to temptation.

I am most emphatically not advocating perfectionism, which, as we are all well aware, can be a source of great personal misery. The perfect, it has been said, is often the enemy of the good. When Ecclesiastes speaks of there being no righteous person on earth who does only good, he is being realistic and observing that humans in both thought and deed are and will likely always be a mixture of good and evil, of the noble, generous and altruistic on the one hand and the shoddy, unworthy and self-serving on the other. It is not my intention to have us wallow in guilt but simply to acknowledge in humility where we have gone astray and make the effort, not to be perfect, but to be better. The Rabbis of old quoted an Aramaic saying, "*Rachmana liba ba'ei*", that the Merciful One, God, seeks out and desires the heart. What they meant, I believe, is that what God wishes from us is not perfection but the sincere and earnest desire to serve, to liberate ourselves from patterns of thinking and acting that are self-destructive and destructive as well to our relationships, and to do better in the coming year than we did in the year that has just elapsed. Deeds shape character and one *mitzvah*, one act of service to God or to our fellows facilitates and leads to another.

The path of repentance has been laid out for us in our ethical and *halachic* texts. Following the acknowledgment of our shortcomings, we must experience a sincere sense of regret for what we have done or failed to do, we must cease the offending behavior and, when a fellow person has been hurt in any way by our deed or omission, we must ask their forgiveness. When we are the offended party, when the apology and request for forgiveness are sincere, and when appropriate restitution has been made, we are obligated to extend pardon, *mehilah*, which does not necessitate reconciliation or embracing the other. We may, if circumstances warrant, go

a step farther and offer *selichah*, forgiveness, rooted in the recognition that the offender and all of us humans are frail creatures, who struggle unremittingly with temptation. The final stage, *kapparah* , atonement, is not up to us, but according to tradition, can only be determined by God.

Because I see myself and all of us as seekers not of perfection but rather of improvement, I regard life as a learning experience. Each year at this season we examine our deeds, acknowledge our transgressions, and hope that we can learn from our mistakes so that we can avoid repeating or reenacting them in the future.

The story of Jonah, which we will read tomorrow afternoon, teaches us that *teshuvah* , repentance or return, are possible even for the most inveterate and hardened of sinners. In true humility, we admit our wrongdoing, with contrite hearts we resolve to do better, and fervently we pray – *s'lach lanu, m'chal lanu, kapper lanu* -forgive us, pardon us, grant us atonement.