

Kol Nidre – Erev Yom Kippur
September 29, 2017 – 10 Tishre 5778

In Woody Allen’s Movie – “Annie Hall” – there is a scene where Annie’s parents, Mr. and Mrs. Hall, are talking with Woody’s character – Alvie’s – parents, Mr. and Mrs. Singer, about the upcoming Jewish holiday of Yom Kippur. The scene sounds something like this:

Mrs. Hall: How do you plan to spend the holidays, Mrs. Singer?

Mrs. Singer: We fast.

Mr. Hall: Fast?

Mr. Singer: No food. You know, to atone for our sins.

Mrs. Hall: What sins? I don’t understand...

Mr. Singer: To tell you the truth, neither do we.

And, to tell you the truth... neither do we...

The reality of human sin, that we can understand; but how do we understand the word “sin” – that presents challenges. It sounds so... well... Christian. Say the word, and it can bring to mind Catholic school or an evangelical preacher channeling the fiery sermon “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.” It can call to mind the Christian connotation of an imperfect state of being that is beyond our ability to change. It provokes guilt, suggesting that we are somehow “bad” people.

However, the Hebrew word for sin – *chet* – literally means “missing the mark... or falling short... or veering off course,” as when an archer misses a

target. This concept of sin suggests a straying from the correct ways, from what is good and straight. However, it refers to our actions, not who we are.

How does this play out during Yom Kippur?

After the flood story in Genesis, we read that “the devisings [*yetzer*] of man’s mind are evil from his youth” (Gen. 8:21). This is the source of the rabbinic concept of the *yetzer*, human instincts, similar to the Freudian id. Later, the rabbis spoke of the *yetzer ha-tov*, the good inclination, and the *yetzer ha-ra*, the evil inclination. I think it is important to note that the rabbis did not say that we are basically evil; endowed with free will, we have the ability to make decisions – good ones... or not so good ones.

The word “forgiveness” or “pardon” (in Hebrew, *salach*) appears for the first time in the story of the golden calf, as Moses pleads to God: “Pardon our iniquity and our sin” (Exod. 34:9). The story of the spies contains a similar idea, as Moses prays on behalf of his people: “Pardon, I pray, the iniquity of this people according to Your great kindness, as You have tolerated [carried] this people ever since Egypt” (Num. 13:5). This text is followed by the verse that is central to the Yom Kippur liturgy: “*Va-yomer Adonai Salachti kid’varecha* - And the Lord said, ‘I pardon, as you have asked’” (Num. 14:37).

Judaism takes a somewhat matter-of-fact view of sin, recognizing that being sinful is part of every human life and that sins can be forgiven. We also recognize, though, that every sin has real life consequences. Forgiveness for sins is readily available, but it does not mean people are free from the consequences of their actions.

Maimonides gave us a framework for dealing with the consequences of our actions:

“*Teshuvah*, or repentance, on Yom Kippur can only win pardon for offences against God, but there is no forgiveness for offences against one’s neighbor, such as assault or injury or theft and so forth, until the wrong done is put right. Even after a man has paid the restitution due to the victim, he must beg his forgiveness. Even if all he did was to taunt his neighbor [and the question of restitution does not arise], he must appease him and beg his forgiveness. If the victim does not wish to forgive him, he should go to him in the company of three friends and they should beg him to grant his pardon. If their efforts were of no avail he should repeat the procedure with a second and a third group, but if the victim still persists in his attitude he should be left alone and the victim is then sinful in refusing his pardon.”

For Maimonides, this seems so clear-cut. We know differently. There are some behaviors for which there is no forgiveness; I cannot imagine that the victims of incest, or of rape, or of physical or mental violence would be considered sinful for refusing to pardon the perpetrator.

However, Maimonides has set up a process: recognition, repentance, return, realignment. You know you have truly made *teshuvah* when you realize that you have done something wrong. Ask forgiveness. If necessary, provide restitution. And if you find yourself in the same situation again – don’t do it!

Let me repeat that: And if you find yourself in the same situation again – don't do it! That is *teshuvah*. *Teshuvah* is an ongoing process; we must constantly pay attention to our habitual behavior and work diligently to change it.

As we take our High Holy Day prayer books off the shelf, we now find a litany of sins that indicts and includes each and every one of us: *Ashamnu, Bagadnu, Derarnu...* arrogance, contempt, deceit, lust, neglect, and violence... an alphabet of woe! Nu? Who did all this? It's the *-nu* – the suffix in Hebrew that means “we.” Collectively, we own them all. We take communal ownership of all our sins. Year after year – we never seem to change. Haven't we learned anything?

“*Al cheyt shechatanu l'fanecha* – For the sin we have committed against You...” We need the “we” because change occurs cumulatively over the entire chain of people who constitute the centuries; on Yom Kippur each of us is part of this historical “we,” the Jewish people that we call our own, and the human family of which the Jewish people are a part. We may open the prayer books as individuals, but we read it as part of an eternal people. It is the ME that is part of the Eternal WE.

Maybe change is harder than we thought. We say these words each year, throughout our lives, and yes, we change, but not in the course of a single Yom Kippur day, or a single year... perhaps, over the course of our lifetime. Our prayers do not offer a magic bullet, but are an invitation for the long haul.

Each rhythmic beating of the chest on Yom Kippur during the *Al Cheyt* or during *Ashamnu* can offer us a chance to begin to make a change.

What if the beating of our chest reflects the beating of our own heart?

Biblically speaking, the heart was seen as the seat of the intellect. When we read about the “hardening of Pharaoh’s heart” in the book of Exodus – it means the failure of the intellect to guide the individual in making the right decisions. As we learn in the Mishnah: “*Mitzvah gareret mitzvah; averah gareret averah* – One good deed leads to another; one transgression leads to another.” So, the ritualized beating of the heart can be seen as the loosening of the hardened heart, and the act of forcing it to “jump-start” its potential for moral introspection.

But – we might not be beating on the heart. Perhaps we are knocking upon the heart as we would be knocking on the Gates of Heaven. Rabbi Joseph Soleveitchik wrote:

God is referred to as “[The One Who] opens the gate for those who come knocking in repentance...” The entire liturgy for Yom Kippur, from beginning to end, is geared to this one goal...”

Each beat... Each knock... is a call to God for forgiveness. “*Si’u Na She’arim Li... Please. Open the gates for me...*”

Our prayers are addressed to God. And yet...

We must recognize that, before approaching God with the request, we must ask forgiveness from those we have wronged – and also grant forgiveness to those who are seeking it from us.

But... it is my chest I am beating. Ron Wolfson teaches that “... Beating my chest reminds me that I cannot reach a state of spiritual cleanliness for the new

year without experiencing the most difficult forgiveness of all – forgiving myself. I beat my chest as a reminder that I must stop beating myself up over the ways I have (indeed) missed the mark. I have to recognize my mistakes and my shortcomings, but I must forgive myself before I can ever hope to forgive others. I must forgive myself before I can ask for forgiveness from others – including God.”

So, on this day of fasting – yep, no food (for those who are able) – we atone for our sins. For our all-to-human shortcomings. We knock on the doors of our hearts to wake up our souls, to awaken the moral compass within. And we knock on the gates of heaven saying: “God, *heneini* – here I am; *Salachti Na* - please forgive me.”

The Sages of old believed in the power of this day – *Yoma* – to wipe the slate clean, even when our own efforts at reconciliation with others and with God fall short. Within the rituals of Yom Kippur, a transcendent power resides.

That was then. This is now. And here we are... The rituals of this day continue to have the potential to bring a sublime change in how we see ourselves, our community, and our world. It can inspire us to carry our insights beyond the walls of our sweet temple, beyond the pages of our prayer book, and bring them to life – to our lives – each and every day.

Through this process, may we bring more mindfulness and compassion into our lives, may we become more ethical, and may we be aware of the holiness that resides in each and every one of us.