

From Awful to Awesome:
Re-envisioning Our Sins to Move Toward Forgiveness

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Shabbat at Elat Chayyim is a glorious experience. After an intense week of study, prayer, and programs at the place we call “rabbi camp”, we welcome Shabbat. I am more excited than usual for Shabbat to begin because, during this particular July week, I met with the Dean of my program and she said, “I see no reason why you couldn’t finish in January, 2006.” Just to hear the word “finish” with a specific date attached, was a thrill, and to hear it from the dean of the Rabbinic Pastor program made my week. I was ready to welcome the Shabbos Bride.

This is a digital recorder. I use it to record music, and parts of classes and services. Tape recording of services is generally OK, but on Shabbat, some participants might object because it’s considered work to use such a device. On Shabbat morning, after a great Torah study, the service began. Reb Ibn, one of the faculty members was leading the service, ...and I was taping it. I had the recorder in my pocket and was able to start and stop it fairly easily. We just finished a meditative section, like our niggun, when the tape unexpectedly went from, “record” to “play” and started to play some previously recorded music. I quickly stopped the tape! Just a couple of seconds of interruption. I apologized to the people next to me. I must have accidentally pushed the “play” button. It got worse. A few minutes later, in another meditative section the digital recorder again started playing music. “I can’t stop the tape.” This time the buttons seemed frozen in the “on” position. I couldn’t stop it. It seemed like an eternity. Not only was I so embarrassed, I was afraid that I ruined the prayer experience for the 200 people in attendance and that I was disrespectful to my fellow participants and to Reb Ibn. I spent the remainder of the service apologizing to those around me, and rejecting others’ attempts to make me feel better. I knew I had to say something to Reb Ibn

Fast forward to “*Yamim Noraim*”, The Days of Awe. It’s an interesting word, “*norah*.” In Hebrew, “*norah*” can mean either “awesome” or “awful.” These High Holy days can be the days of “awesomeness” or the days of “awfulness.” This day is awful if you’re counting the minutes left in the service. At the synagogue where I grew up, every Bar Mitzvah service was exactly 1 hour and 37 minutes. I couldn’t wait for our closing song, *Ein Keloheinu*, which took 1 minute and 49 seconds. Those days were days of “awfulness.” This day is awful if you’re thinking about work, focusing on what you’ll do tomorrow, or even anticipating the “break the fast.” What really makes this day awful is being here to do the spiritual work of the day and avoiding doing that work. You might

think that avoiding the spiritual work makes the day awesome. After all, the work of these days is hard work. I think avoiding the spiritual work is what makes the day awful.

In Judaism, the two happiest days of the year are said to be *Tu 'b Av*, the 15th of *Av*, a kind of Jewish Valentines Day, and..... Yom Kippur. How could Yom Kippur, perhaps the most solemn day of the year, be one of the happiest days of the year? When we do the spiritual work, the rabbis say, it is an “awesome” day. So what is the spiritual work? We go to Torah.

In today’s portion we read, “Life and death I place before you, the blessing and the curse. “*U’v’charta b’chayim*”, “Choose life, so you and your offspring will live.” Choose life! That’s been the work of these past 10 days and it remains the spiritual work for the next few hours.

Choosing life begins with what is... not what we’d like it to be or what we think it should be. An acknowledgement of what is. The first of the 10 commandments is not a commandment at all. It’s an acknowledgement. I am *Adonai*, your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of slavery. No commandment. An acknowledgement of what is. The first step of any 12-step program is also an acknowledgement. I am powerless over alcohol, food, sex, gambling, or work.

So the first step in choosing life is the acknowledgement. What do we acknowledge? Our liturgy tells us what we acknowledge today. We acknowledge today that we’re not perfect, we make mistakes, we miss the mark, and we’ve hurt others. We acknowledge that we’ve “sinned.”

Now the only problem with acknowledging that we’ve sinned is the word, itself. “Sin” is an emotionally loaded and difficult word. I can see the difficulty with the word right here... some people shifted in their seats, some sighed, some held their breath. I have the same reactions. I actually didn’t want to talk about this today. But, as I thought of other topics, I kept coming back to sin. What’s with all this sin?

One of the difficulties with this day is people don’t want to come to services and hear how bad they are. We’re atoning for this sin and that sin..... Just about all of us grew up in families that told us we we’re not OK in some way, to begin with, and now, we have to go to synagogue and hear it from our tradition as well. And, not only do we have to hear how bad we are, on this day, we have to hear it all day long. “*Avinu Malkeinu, chatanu lifanecha.*” *Avinu Malkeinu* we have sinned before you. When Leslie and the choir sing it, it’s beautiful, and haunting and I get tears in my eyes. And, it still says what it says. We have sinned before you. Then, there is, “*Al chet shechatanu lifanecha.* For the sin that we have sinned before you. We said the *Al Chet* prayer last night in Hebrew; we said it this morning in English. If this were an Orthodox service, we would say the *Al Chet* prayer again in the *Mussaf* service, the one after this one and we’d say it again in the *Mincha* service after that. There are 44 lines in the *Al Chet* prayer. In a

traditional service we would say, “*Al chet shechatanu lifanecha*. For the sin which we have sinned before you” 176 times in a 24-hour period. By the time we get to the *Neila* service, where we don’t say the *Al Chet* prayer, the rabbis figured if you didn’t get it after 176 times, you’re probably not going to get it this year.

I did some research and found 4 ways that we can deal with our sins during these High Holy Days. The first way is to use good old fashion denial. “I don’t sin. Sins are for Catholics. I’m Jewish.” So much for that way. The second way to deal with our sins is to change the language. We say, “transgressions” instead of sin. I can get with that, I’ve transgressed. We say, “wrongdoings”, I can get with that, too. I’ve done wrong. Both are easier for me to identify with than “I’ve sinned.” We say, “We missed the mark”. Interesting notion. We’re in the right direction; we’re just off target. To me the reframing of “sin” to “missing the mark,” misses the mark because it serves to minimize our behavior and the impact that it’s had on the other. A victim of child sexual abuse probably wouldn’t describe his perpetrator as someone who “missed the mark.”

The third thing we do to deal with sins is to deal with them symbolically. We have *slichot*, the Saturday night before Rosh Hashanah. At CRC, we write down on a piece of paper a characteristic that we want to be rid of in the New Year and put it in a bowl of water. Nobody ever wants to get rid of their creativity or their intelligence, or their playfulness in the New Year, only a sin or negative characteristic. I’ve been putting my obsessiveness in that bowl for the past ten years. Our *Selichot* ritual is patterned after *Tachlich*, where we go to a body of running water on Rosh Hashanah afternoon and empty the lint from our pockets into the water. The lint is symbolic of our “schmutz” or sins. We have *kapporot*, where we would swing a chicken over our head and then cook the chicken and give it to charity or sell it and give the money to charity, all as a way to remove our sins. And, the traditional Yom Kippur Torah portion says that Aaron puts the sins of the people on to the head of a goat and sends the goat into the wilderness. From this we also get both a symbolic removal of our sins and the word, “scapegoat” from the escaped goat that goes into the wilderness.

Then, our tradition gives us a fourth way. Last night and this morning we read, “For the sins against God, the Day of Atonement atones. But for sins of one person against the other, the Day of Atonement does not atone until they have made peace with one another.” This gets to the spiritual work of these ten days. During the period between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we are to go to people we’ve hurt during the year, acknowledge how we’ve hurt them, apologize and make amends, and work to change the hurtful behavior. Then on Yom Kippur we come before God and ask for God’s forgiveness. I suspect many of us can’t move toward forgiveness because we’re stuck with the negative language of sin. We need a way to get through our block or stuckness about “sin” so we can go on to do the most important spiritual work of forgiveness. Just changing the language from “sin” to, “transgression” or “wrongdoing” doesn’t feel personal enough for me. And keeping the word “sin” feels too emotionally

loaded to be useful. To me the intent of the *Al Chet* prayer is to acknowledge that our actions have hurt to others in some way. The rabbis want us to know that some of what we've done has been hurtful to others. Not all of what we've done. Just some of what we've done. And it's the hurtful things we've done, that we are sorry for, on this day. We've hurt our children, our parents, our siblings, and our friends. We've hurt people because they look different than we look. We've hurt people because they believe something different than what we believe. So why not say, "We have hurt people in our lives before You, God." Then the *Al chet* might sound more like this.

We have hurt other people before you, God, with our words (we've all done that).
 We have hurt other people before you, God by malicious gossip (we've all done that,too).
 We have hurt other people before you, God by narrow-mindedness.
 We have hurt other people before you, God by arrogance.
 We have hurt other people before you, God by passing judgment on others. We've all done all these things.

This format gives us a new way to look at sin. We hurt people in our lives and hurt ourselves. Once we acknowledge this, we can continue with the process of *teshuvah* and forgiveness.

The big forgiveness story in Judaism is the story of Joseph. You know the story. Joseph, a bright kid with a lot of attitude, was favored by his father. This angered his brothers, so his brothers sold him into slavery. If there were ever a need for family therapy, it was in this family. Joseph interprets Pharaoh's dreams and becomes Pharaoh's right hand man. Because of a famine, Joseph's brothers come for food. Joseph certainly has a lot of options to deal with his brothers, revenge, getting even, and punishment, to name a few. When they meet, Joseph says, "I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. But now, do not be pained, and do not let upset be in your eye that you sold me here. For it was to save life that God sent me on before you (Genesis 45:4-5). No apparent hurt, anger, or resentment. I don't think most of us could respond to being hurt the way Joseph did. I know I couldn't. It's just not that easy. Earlier this morning we read together, "I hereby forgive all who have hurt me, all who have wronged me, whether deliberately or inadvertently, whether by word or by deed. May no one be punished on my account." I would be shocked if, saying that one time, "I forgive all who hurt me," allowed you actually to forgive all who hurt you.

It would be great if we could say it and it would happen. If we could all let go of all our hurts and resentments, like Joseph did, a lot of rabbis and therapists would be working part-time. In actuality, forgiveness of the other and of oneself is very hard work because forgiveness goes against our natural tendency (which is to hurt other back or get even) and therefore, forgiveness has to be learned and practiced. And, I don't think we can do all of this work in two days. But, we can get a start on it. Here's how. First, go to the people in your life that you've hurt. One of them may be sitting next to you right now. If you don't know who you've hurt, start with the people closest to you. Second,

tell them how you've hurt them in this past year. If you don't know go the person and ask him/her, "How have I hurt you in the past year?" Ask it in a serious way. When you respond to that question, respond in a serious way without shaming the person - not with something like, "Well, how many hours do you have for me to tell you?" Be specific with your hurts. Do one at a time. "The last time we were at your parent's house I was hurt when you called me a liar." Don't defend yourself. "I didn't call you a liar." Respond with, "I'm so sorry that I hurt you at your parent's house when I called you a liar. "Can you forgive me or work toward forgiveness?" And say what you're going to do to change. "What I'll do next time is talk about myself rather than call you a name."

What you're doing when someone comes to you with an amends is working toward the letting go of your hurt, bitterness, and anger or resentment toward the person, or event, so the hurtfulness doesn't control your life. Forgiveness doesn't mean that you have to like the person or be OK with what happened to you. Forgiveness means you're letting go of your hurt, anger, or resentment. There is actually some research that suggests that beginning to forgive, or even just thinking about forgiving can lead to fewer health problems, decreased stress and anxiety, lower blood pressure, and being more loving toward oneself and others.

Back to my story for just a moment. I went to Reb Ibn and apologized to him for my insensitivity, my disrespectfulness, and my interrupting the service. I told him that I knew what I did was hurtful to him and the community. I asked what I could do to make amends. He said, "You just did it?" "Are you angry with me", I asked. He shook his head, no and smiled. "I guess I 'm starting High Holidays a little early," I said, trying to deflect the intensity with a little humor. He put his arm around me and said, "If this is the biggest thing you atone for, I'd say you had a pretty good year." His forgiveness was a great gift. However, I couldn't forgive myself until I realized a few weeks ago that I could share this experience with all of you, as part of my teaching today.

The hour is late. You still have time before the gates of *teshuvah* close. "*U'v'charta b'chaim*" it says in today's portion. Choose life. May we choose life by deciding to go to the people we've hurt. May we acknowledge what we've done to hurt them, apologize for it and make amends. May we ask for forgiveness and find a way to work toward changing ourselves for the good. That's the teshuvah, the turning in this New Year. And, may we be blessed enough to respond to each other from the Joseph, and Reb Ibn parts of ourselves. That's how we make the transformation from an "awful" day to an "awesome" day, and hopefully, an "awesome" year. *Gemar Chatimah Tovah*. May we all be sealed for a good life in this New Year. Amen.

