

ENDING OUR ESTRANGEMENT FROM GOD

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Seemingly the consensus of congregants is that rabbis should avoid the word “sin.” For many, the idea of sin is, at best, an anachronism or superstition. At worst, it’s incomprehensible to the modern mind. Then, too, the word is a psychological cue for many modern, open-minded, tolerant people to shut their minds as if closing a bank vault at the end of the business day. And even if a rabbi is foolish enough to broach the subject of sin, certainly it should be done only on some special occasion, like High Holy Days.

But we fly in the face of all that now to tell you that we want to talk about sin.

“For God’s sake, *why?*” you ask.

First, because we know that it’s possible to go through the year, including the month of Elul, Rosh Hashanah, and Yom Kippur, without encountering ourselves, without having used those opportunities to turn one’s life. Second, because we know it’s possible to pass through those Days of Awe with little more in the way of a response than something like, “Awe, what’s the big deal?”—hanging on to all those dead and deadening parts of ourselves that create so much pain for others and us.

So we want to raise the subject of sin—but before you close the vault door, we ask you to consider one question: What precisely is your idea of sin and from where did you get it?

Because if your idea of sin comes from mainstream media and culture—images of Burt Lancaster playing the revivalist Elmer Gantry come to mind—then you should acknowledge that your thinking is not *Jewish*. If those are the sources of your ideas of sin and they strike you as foolish nonsense, it would understandable to us.

Sin, from a Jewish viewpoint, certainly represents the triumph of the senses over the moral mind. When we sin we invariably act on the attractions of our senses, more often than not without reflecting on the ultimate consequences of our actions and how they’re likely to estrange us from all that is godly by our own lights. As Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch (1808-1888) has put it, we remove ourself from the “spiritual moral fire” within us. (Hirsch on Genesis 13:13)

Our tradition also teaches that the desires of our senses are not to be eliminated, but ruled over and mastered to serve God. And when we fail to do so, the consequences that have been arranged for us by the Creator are not designed to inflict suffering for its own sake, but to educate and uplift us.

Of course, we also understand sin to be a violation of what Torah teaches is required of us by God. And we understand that when we violate what *we* believe to be the will of God—regardless of what anyone else believes—we literally become estranged from God.

The quality of that estrangement may be understood to range on a continuum from *chata’ah* (חטאה), wrongdoing that reflects unintentional *error*; through *avon* (עון), *willful* wrongdoing; to *pesha* (פשע) overt, intentional *rebellion* against God’s will.

Sin can also be characterized as wronging God, wronging another person, and wronging us. And some sins fit all three types—for example:

- When we steal we sin against God by violating a commandment that serves to perfect the world in the Divine Image, the overall effect being to diminish the public faith and hope in goodness;
- When we steal we sin against the person whose property we took unjustly, thereby fostering distrust and undermining the relationships that make up the fabric of community; and
- When we steal we sin against ourselves by creating within our own spirit a self-image of degradation and unworthiness.

Some of the more common and obvious sins include gossiping and slandering, carrying tales, lying, cheating, stealing, and publicly embarrassing and humiliating others. Some of the less obvious sins include vanity, unkindness, selfishness, deceitfulness, holding a grudge, and callousness.

Certainly we acknowledge the “sinful” character of such behavior. Would any of us argue *for* the benefits of cheating or vanity?—to take but two examples. Do any of us not own at least some of this estranging behavior? Would any of us not prefer a world, even if limited to our own small community or family, in which such behavior was absent?

One way to think about the Jewish idea of sin is to understand the definition of the word “Torah,” which is our basis for knowing what is sinful. Torah (תורה) is often translated as “law” or “teaching,” assuming that the root of the word is י-ר-ה, which means to throw or shoot—that is, to aim for something; better yet, to set a direction—along a path. From this understanding, the Jewish idea of sin is that we have lost our way from the path. Something has pushed us or pulled us off the path,

something outside of ourselves or within us.

Rabbi Hirsch, however, teaches that the word Torah is from the root ה-ר-ה, which means to receive a seed. When in the Hiphil verb form, הוּרַד, it means to plant seeds of truth and goodness. (Hirsch commentary on Genesis 26:5) So from this point of view we see how sin may be understood as our failure to nurture the seeds of truthful and righteous behavior.

How are we to understand such failures in ourselves? And if we're in the habit of condemning our own wrongdoing, yet nonetheless are committed to it, how are we to understand and change ourselves?

As Jews we can't fall back on that old saw, "the devil made me do it." For us, Satan is nothing more than our own evil inclination. (Baba Batra 16a) We do not believe that Satan is an independent, countervailing force contending with God. The Jewish idea is simple: Our God creates within each of us an inclination to do good and an inclination to do evil, and the free will to choose how we will act on them.

Part of the contemporary problem with sin is that there's so much of it, we have become desensitized to it. When Rabbi Moshe was in seminary about 20 years ago, it occurred to him that he and almost everyone he knew were making copies of records, tapes, and computer programs that were copyrighted. He knew that they were stealing the income of their authors, taking what was rightfully theirs—and many of them were people like himself, not financially secure but struggling to make a living. When he raised the subject with a member of the faculty, he pooh-poohed the practice and refused to talk about it seriously. Now, only two decades later, the Internet has made such thievery possible on an unimagined scale. The *Los Angeles Times* reported (August 20, 2007) a Gallup Organization survey commissioned by the United States Chamber of Commerce that found 25 percent of Los Angeles residents "knowingly bought, copied or downloaded illegal goods in the last year." The estimated rate nationwide is 20 percent, which is hardly a cause for celebration.

In a similar vein, we have heard people insist that there is nothing morally wrong with *purposefully* wasting the time of another person—arguing that it's not stealing—although eventually we all come to know that our time in this life is worth incalculably more than our records, cassette tapes, or computer programs.

Often when we find ourselves off the path—morally vulnerable or self-victimized—we agonize and ask ourselves: How did I ever let myself get to this place? How did I let my thinking become so

tangled? What was so enticing that I eventually ensnared those I love and myself into this mess?

Looking back we see that at the "moment of truth," when facing temptation, we were susceptible to wrongdoing. In some ways it's like being an alcoholic: we can't resist when the "drink" is put before us—whether the irresistible lure is sex, money, prestige, possessions, power, vanity, or whatever.

Under such circumstances there is one pivotal question we may ask ourselves: How am I going to avoid replaying this disaster?

To press the analogy of the alcoholic a bit further, we know that when we're sober and there's no alcohol around, we can ask for help and, with it, raise ourselves up. So how do we prepare ahead for the "moment" of truth—in effect, for the window of "opportunity"—when, facing irresistible temptation, we're susceptible to our own *yetzer hara*, our inclination to do wrong?

Akaviah ben Mahalalel (a first century C.E. *tanna**) teaches us: "Consider three things and you will not come to sin: Know from where you came, to where you are going, and before Whom you are destined to give an account. . . ." (Pirke Avot 3:1)

To reflect upon where we have come from, on how we have chosen to use our capacities, requires, in part, that we *engage others in the reflection*, that we allow what we have done to be reflected back to us—in short, that we review from where we have come with the those who love us. Consider that our commitments to turn our life rarely have more than the strength or power that we invest in them with the witness of others.

This brand of confession demands a level of courage and integrity that we rarely demonstrate to ourselves or anyone else. But such reflection, possibly more than anything else, serves as the anchor for the remorse and forgiveness that is necessary if we are to turn our lives, ending our estrangement from God. And as we face this daunting challenge we may console ourselves with the thought that those we have wronged will not find surprising what we confess to them, but for the most part they will be grateful that we are aiming our lives in a new and godly direction, guided by Torah.

Akaviah ben Mahalalel also tells us to reflect upon where we are going. Again, the challenge is not only to carry on our internal dialogue about our future, but also to allow our commitments to return to the path of Torah to be affirmed and reflected back to us by those who love us. The utility of this approach is not hard to see.

Imagine you want to quit smoking, or jettison any other destructive habit, and you seek advice on the best means. One counselor advises you to take

some quiet time alone to reflect on the negatives of smoking, all the benefits of quitting, what God and your family want you to do, and then to “make up your mind and do it.” Another counselor advises you to plan a day hike to the top of Mount Whitney, inviting all your family and friends to accompany you; when you get to the top of the mountain you are to vow explicitly to God, to your family, to your friends, and to yourself, that you will never again smoke; and then you are to host a celebration of life on the top of the mountain.

Which approach do you think will be more effective in helping you to turn your life? It's a no-brainer, right?

So we must allow our decisions to return to the path to be reflected back to us by others if those decisions are to become the compass that aids us in navigating its twists and turns in the future.

Finally, Akaviah ben Mahalalel tells us to know before whom we are destined to give an accounting. In some ways, we can be our own harshest critics. Too many lives end in feelings of guilt and worthlessness. Too many days are spent in private shame and regret. And in this sense we can be accountable in the most destructive ways to ourselves.

But we are also accountable to those who love and care for us. This accounting has a zero-sum aspect: what we use, they lose; what fulfills our momentary desire empties their hope and faith. In

short, this accounting is not some final summing up to determine whether we are destined for *sheol* or *olam haba*, whether we will go “down below” or to “the world to come.” This accounting is in the here and now, moment to moment, day to day, visible for all to see—because what we do to those we love and care about is known, and both they and we pay the price for it.

Finally, as we choose to tilt the world toward good or evil with our individual acts, we face the divine accounting. No, not a booming voice and lighting bolts from heaven—this isn't Sinai. What we face for the most part is a world that's a little less righteous, a little less truthful, and a little less just, a little less free, a little less peaceful, and a little less kind—a world that we co-produce with God and in which we all must live and give an accounting of ourselves. But occasionally our self-indulgent wrongdoing, regardless of whether malfeasance or nonfeasance, can reach far beyond the immediate circle of those we love, frighteningly touching the lives of scores or hundreds of perfect strangers.

It's not too late. The gates remain open. We can still draw together with those we love and allow them to reflect back to us where we have come from, where we are going, and how we are all accountable. We can still choose to turn our lives—ending our estrangement from God.

* “Tanna, tannaim (Aramaic—תנאים), the sages from the period of Hillel to the compilation of the Mishnah, i.e., the first and second centuries C.E. The word *tanna* (from Aramaic *teni*, ‘to hand down orally,’ ‘study,’ ‘teach’) generally designates a teacher either mentioned in the Mishnah or of *mishnaic* times (Ber. 2a). It was first used in the *Talmud* in this sense to distinguish such teachers from later authorities, the *amoraim*.” (*Encyclopedia Judaica*.)

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