

Kol Nidre: “Missers of the Mark” in the Hands of A God Who Cares

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By Rabbi Rachel Bearman

Tonight, I want to talk with you about the concept of sin. I recognize that for many of us who belong to modern, liberal, religious communities, even hearing the word “sin” spoken from the bimah makes us feel uncomfortable and maybe even confused.

I have to admit that the idea of dedicating a sermon to exploring the concept of sin makes me feel like I’m channeling Jonathan Edwards who delivered his famous sermon, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” in 1741. In his address, Edwards explained his conviction that all human beings have been condemned to hell because of their sinful natures. In case there are some here tonight who are unfamiliar with this sermon, I have chosen to share the following excerpt because it is representative of both Edwards’ theology and the sermon’s general tone.

The only verb that seems appropriate is “thunders.” So, here are the words that Edwards thundered at his congregation almost three hundred years ago:

“So that thus it is, that natural Men are held in the Hand of God over the Pit of Hell; they have deserved the fiery Pit, and are already sentenced to it; and God is dreadfully provoked, his Anger is as great towards them as to those that are actually suffering the Executions of the fierceness of his Wrath in Hell, and they have done nothing in the least to appease or abate that Anger, neither is God in the least bound by any Promise to hold 'em up one moment; the Devil is waiting for them, Hell is gaping for them, the Flames gather and flash about them, and would fain lay hold on them, and swallow them up; the Fire pent up in their own Hearts is struggling to break out; and they have no Interest in any Mediator, there are no Means within Reach that can be any Security to them. In short, they have no Refuge, nothing to take hold of, all that preserves them every Moment is the meer arbitrary Will, and uncovenanted unobliged Forbearance of an incensed God.”¹

You can disagree with Edwards’ arguments, but you can’t deny that the man was an evocative writer.

What many of us have forgotten is that despite the notoriety of the Calvinists and the Puritans’ preoccupation with the idea of sin, for thousands of years, Jewish theologians have been fascinated by the concept as well. In fact, there is a remarkable amount Jewish literature that offers a wide variety of explanations for what constitutes a sin and how one should repent after committing one.

¹ <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1053&context=etas>

Over the next twenty-four hours, we will spend quite a bit of time acknowledging the sins that we have committed in the past year. We will confess to many, many things- including stealing, ridiculing, lying, and devising evil. We will beat our chests as we sing, “Ashamnu, b’gadnu, g’zalnu...” and on and on.

If you pay attention to the words of these prayers, you’ll notice that in addition to using the more traditional word, “sin,” our mahzor (High Holy Day prayer book) translates the Hebrew word, “cheit” as “doing the wrong thing,” “wronging God,” and even as “missing the mark.”

The sheer number of times that “cheit” or sin is mentioned in the mahzor would suggest that it occupies a prominent place in our understanding of the world. But, in reality, outside of Yom Kippur, we rarely discuss what the Jewish Tradition has to say about sin. And, that’s unfortunate because when we allow the idea of sin or “cheit” to fade into the background, we lose one of the greatest strengths our tradition has to offer.

So, tonight, we are going to talk about sin. We are going to explore what sin has meant at different points in our history. Then, we’re going to examine the question of what the concept of sin has to offer us as a contemporary Jewish community.

The first time the word “cheit” (sin) appears in the Hebrew Bible is in the story of Cain and Abel who were the sons of Eve and Adam and brothers who weren’t exactly the poster children for positive sibling interactions. Throughout the Hebrew Bible, people were judged as having sinned both when they stepped over the boundaries established by God as well as when they willfully ignored the responsibilities that God has given to the Israelites.

Within the priestly system of ancient Israelite society, sins were understood to throw a person out of balance because they put strain on the relationships between the individual, God, and the community. For ancient Israelites, atoning for sin was a clear-cut process that involved making a sin-offering in the tabernacle and then later in the temple. Once the correct offering had been made, the person was considered to be back in harmony with God and the community.

The Medieval philosopher, Saadia Gaon imagined that each good deed a person did added light to their soul. Correspondingly, Saadia argued that each sin added shadow to the soul of the person who committed it. In order to clear accumulated shadow, the person would need to engage in repentance or t’shuvah. Saadia believed that at the end of one’s life, the soul would be measured and the person’s place in the afterlife would be assigned based on the levels of light and darkness found within his or her soul.

Continuing our trip through time, we arrive in 1846 when Reverend (as rabbis were often called at that point) J.K. Gutheim defined sin and repentance very clearly in the sermon he gave on Shabbat Shuvah, the Shabbat between the High Holy Days. Gutheim wrote:

For what is sin? Sin is every thought, every word, every action, against the better conviction that dwells in our soul. The sorrow arising from [sin], the anxiety which immediately follows every bad action, the displeasure with ourselves, the inward contempt for our degradation, the mortification we feel on account of our separation from the Most Holy, from God and [God's] Law—this is repentance.²

Whether or not we agree that sin is an act that knocks us out of balance, a behavior that adds darkness to our souls, or every thought, word, or action that goes against our better impulses, it is clear that generations of Jewish people have considered the idea of sin to have been important enough to wrestle with. This is why it is easy for me to suggest that, even today, sin is important enough for us to continue wrestling with it as well.

As Reform Jews, we embrace each individual's responsibility to assess the many different aspects of our beautiful tradition and then incorporate into their lives those that they find uplifting and edifying. However, this emphasis on each person's ability to shape their observance and religious practice was never meant to come at the expense of shared communal values.

When we forget that it is our responsibility to not only chart our individual religious paths but also to establish and then support communal, ethical standards, we weaken the importance and power of Judaism.

Reform Judaism is not a wishy-washy movement. We have standards for ourselves and others. We weaken ourselves and we weaken our communities when we forget these standards and our ethical convictions. We are a movement that has inherited a fierce dedication to the spirit of the prophets who railed against injustice, sinful acts, and all behavior that polluted the community.

Over the last several years, multiple swastikas have been found in our towns. After each of these incidents, people are quick to suggest that kids were just being kids - as if this assessment excused the behavior itself. This is not the Jewish way to approach situations like this. The Jewish approach is to declare that the behavior is wrong, unacceptable, and misses the mark.

I think we hesitate to make that kind of declaration because we worry that labeling something as wrong condemns the responsible person to the hell of Jonathan Edward's imagination. But, in the Jewish Tradition, labeling something as wrong is not the end of the conversation.

In fact, the Jewish Tradition expects all of us to miss the mark at some point or another and therefore teaches us exactly how to move forward from our mistake. Sin is an expected part of life and therefore there are established ways to deal with it- namely by repenting, by showing humility, and by giving back to the community.

² <http://www.jewish-history.com/occident/volume4/nov1846/repent.html>

The Jewish Tradition teaches us that it is only by judging something to be wrong that we have the ability to make it right.

But, we are compassionate people, and I know that we worry that we don't understand- maybe could never understand- all of the reasons that someone acted badly or sinned. We wonder if perhaps the person who threw a stone through the window of the home next to Wilton's Hindu temple was struggling with any number of things that could have caused him or her to act out, to act badly.

I believe strongly that this impulse to excuse bad actions because of extenuating circumstances comes from generous and giving hearts. But, it also fundamentally confuses what our tradition teaches us about moral behavior.

When we confess our sins on Yom Kippur, we do not say, "Forgive me God because I am a liar, a betrayer, a thief."

Instead, we say, "Of these wrongs we are guilty: We lie. We betray. We steal." Everyone has committed sins. Everyone has missed the mark intentionally or unintentionally. And, no matter why we committed these misdeeds, they were wrong and we are responsible for them. But, even more than that, these sins are not our identities. We lie. We are not liars. We betray. We are not betrayers. Identifying sinful or bad behavior and condemning them is not the same as condemning the people responsible for those actions.

When we tell ourselves, our families, and our communities that all behaviors can be excused because of extenuating circumstances, we are undermining the moral authority and the responsibilities that we have inherited as members of a Jewish community.

There is power in saying that a behavior is wrong. There is strength in seeing something and labeling it as unacceptable. There is also power in helping another person make a wrong right again. There is strength in providing a path forward for someone who wants to change their behavior and avoid making the same mistake again in the future.

The Jewish concept of sin is based on the assumption that all of us- every one of us- will miss the mark at some point or another. The universality of this human imperfection could have meant that generations of rabbis would excuse misbehavior because every person would, at some point or another, be guilty of it. Instead, these rabbis, these leaders argued that living Jewish lives means aiming for more than the lowest, common standard.

Living Jewish lives means being self-reflective and being committed to assessing our behavior and judging as unacceptable those acts that pollute our individual spirits and the spirit of our community.

When we hesitate to label something as wrong, we lose the ability to make anything better.

One of my professors, Rabbi Dr. Richard Sarason wrote about sin in an essay that appears in the beginning of our Yom Kippur prayer books. He insightfully explained that,

“The process of t’shuvah —repentance, return, realignment —follows upon the acknowledgment of our failings and our recognition of what needs to change. What does t’shuvah mean in practical terms? Maimonides (Mishneh Torah, Hilchot T’shuvah 2.1) provided a brief definition that remains powerful today: What is perfect repentance? It is when an opportunity presents itself to repeat the same behavior, and, while being physically able to do so, you nonetheless refrain, because you have had a change of heart and resolved not to behave this way.”

Over the next twenty-four hours, we will take this opportunity to use the words of our prayer book to reflect on that which we are most proud of and that which we know we must change. We will seek out moments when we can honestly assess our behavior from the past year and find those actions that have thrown us out of balance, clouded our spirits, and have put us in conflict with our better impulses. We will bravely confess the sins we have committed, the marks that we have missed, and we will embrace the opportunity of t’shuvah, of repentance. We will identify what we have done wrong, and we will commit to being better. We will trust that Judaism is a companion that will push us to grow, that will force us to acknowledge when we are wrong, and that will help us to evolve, develop, and become stronger, better human beings.

We can do this. And, we will do it together.

G’mar Chatimah Tovah. May we be inscribed for a good year.