

Scraping the Rust: T'shuvah and Racial Justice
Rosh Hashanah Sermon, 5781 (September 19, 2020)
By Rabbi Joshua R. S. Fixler

Introduction: Man in the Mirror

I am a good person. When I look at my reflection in the mirror, I see a kind person. I see a patient person. I see a loving person. I know who I am.

And yet, there are moments where I do not act like the person I *know* I am. Moments, where I am short tempered with someone I love, where I am impatient with a stranger, where I am unforgiving or uncharitable. Somehow, my actions tarnish my image of the person I imagine myself to be.

Because, in truth, I am *not* a good person. Which is to say that no one is a good person. We are not good or bad, kind or cruel, sinners or saints. *We are all of these.* We are the choices we have made in each successive moment. We are our aspirations tempered by our actions.

Defining Sin/*Cheit*

The Jewish concept of sin, *cheit*, literally translates as “to miss the mark.” This presents something radically different from our secular understanding of sin. In Judaism, sin is not a character flaw, a bug in the programming of human nature. *Rather, sin is free will's companion.* We can choose right or wrong. So sometimes we will choose wrong. Often we miss the mark. Like an archer, we take aim at the target, but miss the bullseye. A wayward arrow does not reveal a defect in the archer's character. All that an archer can do is draw back another arrow, adjust her stance, and fire again. All we can do is get better, over time, at hitting our mark.

The Message of the season

This is the message of the Days of Awe. While the rest of the year, we might be so arrogant, so deluded as to say that we are “blameless and free of sin,” we cannot escape this season without facing the truth: “we have stumbled and strayed. We have done wrong.”¹ The High Holy Days ask us to finally be honest with ourselves. We are not bad people. We are not good people. We are people who acted. The actions others saw, and actions only God saw. The actions that felt like choices, and the actions where we convinced ourselves that we had no choice. The High

¹ Language from the blessing of the Yom Kippur Vidui (Confession) *tavo l'fanecha*. Interestingly, this line was actually changed for Mishkan Hanefesh, to reflect a much earlier text, such as what is found in Seder Rav Amram (19th century). In later machzors, up through Gates of Repentance, the word *ein* was added to say “we are not so arrogant as to say we are perfect...”. This was likely amended into the ancient text because people could not handle admitting so publicly their own arrogance.
<https://ravblog.ccarnet.org/2015/05/adjust-machzor-mistake/>

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Holy Days ask us to take account, to reread this year's chapter in the book of our lives, to know we can do better.

The gift of these sacred days is *t'shuvah* -- repentance -- return. The reminder that when we stray, we can find our way back. When we hurt people, we can make amends.

The High Holy Days teach us three essential truths:

- First that we are not perfect, and that we are not always who we strive to be.
- Second that our actions are choices, and that our choices have consequences.
- Third, that where we have broken, we have the power to repair.

Scraping the Rust

The Chassidic master the Seer of Lublin imagines *t'shuvah* like a peasant in the marketplace, scraping rust off the metal of a barrel. A barrel is no good if it is rusted. *And* a barrel will never stop rusting. This is the necessity and seeming futility of *t'shuvah*: we must scrape the rust around our souls, to reveal what is essential underneath. And, almost as soon as we are done, we must begin again.

There is no shame in *t'shuvah*. *Cheit* is merely the byproduct of living in this world and making our choices. It is corrosive only when unmitigated. This season of repentance insists: You are not done yet. Not done growing. Not done learning, not done fixing what you have broken. Year after year we come to this season needing to be reminded of these truths, needing again to scrape off the rust that accumulates around our hearts that fools us into thinking we are finished products. That deludes us into believing that we do not have a choice. That robs us of the opportunity to heal those we have hurt. We do *t'shuvah*, not because we are bad, but because we endeavor to do better.

Introduction of Racism

This year, we do not have to look far for examples of places where we can do better. It has been a year full of pain, and loss, and suffering. Stuck at home in quarantine, what shook me the most, was watching story after story on the news of Black people killed by police. George Floyd murdered in the street. Breonna Taylor murdered in her own home. Just weeks ago, Jacob Blake shot seven times in front of his children. And people marching in the streets, and yes, rioting too, demanding to be seen and heard. Declaring a truth that *should* be unassailable, that *should* be unremarkable, that should be *inalienable*, that their lives matter. That Black lives matter. In all my interactions with police, I have never, not once, feared that I might be shot. There are Black and Brown people in our congregation who are scared every time they see a police officer, even when that officer is protecting their synagogue. There are parents in our

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religious school who teach their Black and Brown children strategies for not being murdered. And the white people in our congregation, like me, will never fully understand that pain.

By some estimates, as many as 15% of the American Jewish community are Jews of Color.² And if you perceive, as I do, that our congregation does not reflect all of this diversity, then try to remind yourself that this might be because of the culture we've built. What doors must we open if we want to continue to call ourselves a "welcoming" congregation?

Rabbi, I'm not a racist

People come to me, and they say "but rabbi. I'm not a racist. Racism is something we fixed. Rabbi Heschel marched with King. Our people have been the victims of hatred, not the perpetrators of it." As if we had eradicated racial discrimination simply by changing our laws and not also with the long hard work of changing our culture. As if a person who is a target of white supremacists cannot also benefit from a system built on white supremacy.

The message of these High Holy Days is that sin is not something we are, sin is something we do. And so racist is not something we are. Racism is something we do, something we enact. And I am called to look closely at my actions, and to say I am not a sinner, but I have missed the mark. I am not a bad person, but I have caused pain. I am not a racist, but I have done racist things.

The rabbis describe *t'shuvah* as a process,³ where the essential first step is *hakarát ha-chét'*, the recognition of our sins. We cannot address a problem we will not name. I have sinned, I have acted in ways that failed to affirm the full humanity of Black and Brown people.

Identifying My Own Sin

I am the president of a local interfaith justice coalition. Recently the board conducted interviews with people whose membership had lapsed. I was assigned to call a friend who is Black pastor here in town. After months of phone calls, emails and texts with no response, he finally answered. He said, "I know why you are calling. In truth, I've been avoiding you." Then he shared with me that he no longer came to our meetings because being a Black man in white liberal spaces is exhausting. I said I didn't understand. He explained that he was tired of having to point out all the blind spots in our best intentions, tired of not seeing us show up when his community was threatened. He said he was too busy to teach us how to see him in the fullness of his humanity. So he stopped coming.

² <https://ejewishphilanthropy.com/how-many-jews-of-color-are-there/>

³ <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/spiraling-towards-repentance/>

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I was defensive. We can't be biased. Our group prides itself on its diversity. But his willingness to be vulnerable and honest called me to answer in kind. And this meant doing *hakarát ha-chét* -- acknowledging my sinful actions.

Hearing him, I recalled a similar conversation from years earlier. Another friend, a rabbinic student who is Black, explained to me that she finds Jewish spaces exhausting because, she said, people demand her story. Every time she walks into a synagogue, people ask "Are you new here? How did you come to be Jewish?" It was tiring to have to explain that "yes, her parents were Jewish" and "no, she was not adopted." Nobody ever asks me those questions. Part of privilege is the freedom not to be exhausted by your friends.

Remembering this story opened my heart to the pastor's pain, to his sadness at being let down by the people who claimed to be *his* friends. In our supposedly inclusive organization, we failed to see his lived experiences as a Black man. We made him feel invisible. As a leader, I had to take responsibility. I contributed to this culture. I had done wrong, despite my best intentions, or maybe because of them.

We are responsible for all the impacts of our actions, not just the ones we intend. The Mishnah teaches that a person must repair the damage they cause "inadvertently or deliberately. If they were awake or even if they were asleep."⁴ Our actions are choices, whether we make them consciously or unconsciously, because of animus or bias, with selfish intentions or noble ones. We are responsible all the same.

We are not always so lucky to have people who love us enough to call us on our missteps. Sometimes, often, the work has to start with us. The work of looking back at our actions not through the lens of our intentions, but with clear focus on our impacts. The work of educating ourselves on the forces that shape our behavior and influence our choices. This is why *hakarát ha-chét* is the first step on the path of repentance. Only after we identify the sins will we have the ability, let alone the courage, to start correcting them.

We are not racist but we have ALL done racism

I **do not** think there is a person watching this stream who thinks of themselves as racist. And, I believe that every single person watching this could acknowledge that they have made at least one racist choice this year. If we are honest, there were times, big or small, intentional or inadvertent, where we treated someone as superior, someone else as inferior based on their race. White people, Black people, all of us. We are all coated in rust. We have avoided. We have been biased, we have condemned, we have dog whistled, we have equivocated. We have failed to stand up. Our sins are an alphabet of indignity.

⁴ Mishnah, Bava Kama 2.6. See also Haamek Davar on Deut 24:9

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Calls to Action

The next 10 days present a unique opportunity to scrape the rust. In addition to our usual rituals of apologizing to our loved ones, we can resolve this year to take time each day to investigate the ways bias has manifested itself in us this year, the ways we have contributed to racism or worked to dismantle it? I have created an online tool called [10 Days of T'shuvah](#). For each of the days of Repentance, I suggest something short to read, watch, or do to expand your own understanding of race and racism. By devoting *just* 15 minutes per day we will each complete a full two and a half meaningful hours of exploration by N'ilah. Some of us may have time to dig even deeper, so there is also a longer opportunity suggested for each day. Together we can share in this roadmap of self-analysis which will help us to arrive at Yom Kippur better equipped to identify our own sins around race and more able to address them in our ongoing practice of *t'shuvah*.

Then, on Yom Kippur there will be two conversations for deeper engagement with these themes. One is an opportunity to learn from Diversity, Equity and Inclusion trainer LaTonya Wilkins, who will empower us to build towards meaningful change in our lives and community. Later in the afternoon, Rabbi Silk will be leading a discussion of Marra Gad's book the Color of Love, about being a Jew of color and facing racism within the Jewish community.

This work does not end on Yom Kippur. You'll soon be hearing about a number of opportunities and actions in the congregation in coming months, including a book club to discuss Ibram X. Kendi's How to Be an Antiracist. Details for these will be shared with the congregation in the coming weeks.

We can do *T'shuvah* for Racism

The High Holy Days declare these three truths:

1. First, we are not perfect. Rather we are growing, we are striving, we are talking stock and adjusting our aim.
2. Second, we are responsible for our choices. The ones we make knowingly and even the ones that we make unintentionally.
3. Third, where we have done wrong, we can repair.

These truths are central to addressing racism. We are not racist, but neither are we free from racism. We have the power to choose, and the power to repair.

I am asking all of us to accept that there is work of *t'shuvah* to be done around racism, for us as individuals and as a nation. This is not a sign of some fundamental flaw or some irreparable breach. What could be holier, more Jewish or more American, than the desire to form a *more* perfect union. We need not approach this repentance with shame. We can approach it with joy.

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The joy of *T'shuvah*

Because that is the radical gift that our conception of *cheit* gives us, the idea that repentance can be joyful. In a secular context, the work of repair, the work of apology, the work of confronting our own racism might feel discouraging, heart wrenching, guilt laden. This makes us seek easy answers, or forgo the process altogether. But we must engage. And because *T'shuvah* is about reconnecting with our truest selves, it need not be dreary at all. The Baal Shem Tov remarks on the surprisingly upbeat melodies of the prayers of confession, □Yai-lai-lie. He compares it to singing a happy melody while sweeping the floor in the home of a cherished parent or the palace of a beloved ruler - a task we do wholeheartedly and happily. The peasant scraping the rust from the barrel hums joyfully, knowing that change is possible, that the barrel can be renewed, as it was in days gone by.

We return today, as we do year after year, ready to do that holy work of scraping off the rust. May we find the metal underneath is strong and resilient. May we look at ourselves and take an honest accounting of who we are. May our actions ever more closely resemble the person we aspire to be. And may God bless the joyful work of *t'shuvah*, the sacred endeavor of growing and becoming.

Shanah Tovah