

“Our Thoughts Program Our Actions”

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I am sure that many of you have been following the unfolding presidential campaigns, and some of you may have even watched the debates. Regardless of how closely you have been paying attention, it would be hard to miss some of the outrageous, almost clownish comments that certain candidates (some more than others) have been making in these early stages of what looks to be a very long campaign season. I recently read an article about some of the most unfortunate political one-liners in American history. And one that surely makes the list is Jimmy Carter’s Playboy magazine interview from November of 1976. Now I mean no disrespect to the 39th president, I wish him *refuah sh’leima*, that he should have strength in his battle against cancer. But perhaps you recall that the born-again, evangelical Carter told the interviewer, “I’ve looked on a lot of women with lust. I’ve committed adultery in my heart many times.”¹ Do you know that after then-Governor Carter said that, he dropped 15 points in the polls, almost costing him the election?! I’m not entirely sure why that happened, particularly since he didn’t admit to acting on any of those licentious thoughts. Was it just a case of TMI, too much information in an age when people weren’t as accustomed as they are today to politicians admitting all kinds of actual immodest acts? Or do people really believe that lusting in your heart is in fact a sin? Carter was referring to a passage in the New Testament Book of Matthew, known as the Sermon on the Mount, where it says that looking at a woman with lust in one’s heart is an act of adultery! That seems very un-Jewish to me. Judaism gives surprisingly wide latitude when it comes to our mental life; our thoughts; even our religious beliefs. Think about it: there are hardly any litmus tests of belief in our tradition. We don’t ask *bnai mitzvah* to make a statement of faith before they read their *maftir*; we don’t ask new members to declare their dogma before accepting their membership applications; in fact, while I was asked a lot of questions about classes I taught, programs I ran, and various professional scenarios I was involved in, I wasn’t asked one question about my faith when I was a candidate for this job! Jews are always much more interested in what we do than what we profess; how we act, over what we think about. And consequently,

¹ http://articles.latimes.com/1996-12-17/local/me-9919_1_jimmy-carter

both in the realm of mitzvot and in the realm of sin, the place where the rubber meets the road is what we actually do or don't do. I know we all feel that it's a good idea to give charity, or to feed the hungry, but until we actually put the money in the *pushke* or bring back our brown bags filled with groceries on Kol Nidrei, then we haven't actually fulfilled the mitzvah. And similarly, from a Jewish point of view, whatever President Carter might have fanaticized about, he didn't sin, he didn't commit adultery unless he acted on those fantasies. I have always regarded this not only as one of the central differences between Judaism and Christianity, but also a certain badge of pride. Talk is cheap. Feelings are ephemeral. Beliefs change over time. But what you do or don't do, that's the *tachlis*; that's the real deal; that's what really matters.

But then I took a closer look at the series of *al cheits* that we recite so many times during this holiday. Many of them relate to what I just described: sins in real time, in real action. Sins that you and I commit against other people; sins where there is clearly an injured party. :

But as I scanned the pages of the mahzor I couldn't escape the fact that there's a whole other category that seems to fly in the face of everything I have just assumed about Jewish theology...

Al chet shechatanu lifenecha, b'harhur ha'lev, for the sin we committed against you in our innermost thoughts [sounds rather Carter-esque]

...*imutz ha'lev*, hardening our own hearts

...*netiyat garon*, arrogance

...*einayim ramot*, condescension

...*azut metzach*, stubbornness...

Wait a minute...what's going on here? The mahzor is making a claim on thought, attitude, state of mind. It seems that I can sin *inwardly* as well as outwardly; sin doesn't only happen when there is an injured party and a victim, but I can sin even in the innermost parts of my own heart and mind, where the only parties to that sin are me, myself, and I.

I recently read a study that was of great interest to me, and helped me clarify this issue...it was a study of why some people find exercising harder than others. I see some people on the edges of their seats now... A social psychologist at NYU explored how perception, or our mind's eye

affects how we feel about exercise. First she measured the hips and waists of study participants. Then she told the participants they were going to race to a finish line holding a weight. But before doing that she asked each participant to estimate the distance of the finish line. Those with higher hip-to-waist ratios—that is people in poorer physical shape— estimated the distance to the finish line as being farther away than those who were in better shape, those who had lower hip-to-waist ratios. In that way, she said, our mind’s eye works against us...makes it harder for us to do what is healthy and beneficial, and may even talk us out of it altogether. It’s too far, I’ll never make it; I can’t carry a weight that distance, I’m too out of shape; Man that finish line is really far away, I’m not up for a race like that. And then we just don’t do it. But the professor didn’t stop there. She then compared people who were out of shape but who were also highly motivated to get in shape to estimate the distance to the finish line. What she found was remarkable. Those people estimated the distance to the finish line to be just as close if not closer than participants who were in good physical shape. So even though this sample was overweight, and out of shape, the fact that they had a positive motivation, a reasonable fitness goal, that made all the difference in the world to how they perceived that finish line.

I think this is precisely the Jewish twist on the issue...It’s not the Jimmy Carter lusting in your heart equals committing adultery. Rather, when our tradition warns us about sinning in our hearts it is warning us become convinced that we lack the willpower, the conviction, the commitment, the certainty that we can accomplish what we know is good; what we know is right. Sins of the heart are the sins discourage us, that deter us, that cause us to sour on life. Sins of attitude cause us to see the glass as half empty, and everyone else as wretched and out to get us. Both the perpetrator and the victim of these sins is us...they deprive us of power, of hope, and of purpose. That’s why they’re such a concern...that’s why we have to repent for them just as we repent for sins in the external world.

The great Chassidic Master Rabbi Levi Yitchak of Berdichev lived in the late 18th Century in Ukraine, and was one of the most beloved teachers of Eastern European Jewry. The Rabbi once commented on a seeming redundancy at the beginning of parashat Bechukkotai, in Leviticus 26:3. The beginning of that portion opens with the words: *Im bechukkotai teileichu v’et mitzvotai tishmoru*: If you follow My laws and observe My commandments, then I [God] will bless you [the Jewish people] in all kinds of wonderful ways. Levi Yitzhak wondered why the

Torah had to say if you follow my laws and observe my teachings... isn't that the same thing? Now since the classical way of interpreting the Torah is that no language is superfluous, he offered the following distinction. When God says "if you follow My laws," that is referring to our inner lives... how we view the world, how we think. This is a statement that acknowledges that our thoughts program how we experience the world... and that if we think positively, if we think confidently, optimistically; if our thoughts are informed by holiness and godliness, then we'll be able to fulfill the second half of the sentence: *et mitzvotai tishmoru*, we'll be able to uphold the mitzvot in the real world. Rabbi Levi Yitzchak was articulating a strong connection between our thoughts and our behaviors. A causal relationship between how we think and what we do. It's like the Yiddish proverb: *Tracht gut, vet zain gut*, Think good and it will be good.

The more I thought about this, the more evidence I saw of it in our tradition. At the end of parashat Bereishit, just before the Noah story God observes: *kol yetzer machshavot libo rak ra kol ha'yom*. The problem in the world, God diagnoses, is that people think evil thoughts 24/7. And those evil thoughts lead to evil deeds, so much so that God wants to wipe out the entire world with a flood! In Leviticus, the Torah teaches: *Lo tisna et achicha bil'vavecha*, don't harbor hate for other people in your heart, *lo titor et b'nai amecha*, don't bear grudges... more claims on our mental/emotional lives. God knows that if we go around with hearts filled with hate, or bearing grudges against all kinds of people, eventually we are likely to act on them. We'll become unfair, we'll become hurtful, we'll become vengeful... not only in our minds but in our deeds. That internal hate will produce external transgression. That's why we say in the third paragraph of the *Sh'ma* everyday, *lo taturu acharei levavchem*... be very careful about following your heart's desire. You know what the leading cause of death in this country is? Heart disease! Don't always do what your heart tells you. Sometimes it's infected with the diseases of hate, revenge, jealousy, and other dangerous toxins.

I was also thinking about Job. Not because he was harboring negativity, just the opposite! Here's a guy who is pious, generous, kind to everyone, a wonderful care-taker of his family. And what happens to him: He loses everything. His loved ones, his property, everything is destroyed. This happens because the Satan, the Accuser only looks for negativity. Job was living a wonderful, upstanding life, and the whole agenda of the Satan is to break him down and search for hidden faults. This is another destructive example of those who harbor negativity and

cynicism and suspicion. Do you know people like that? Who are always looking at the critical angle, who always seem to focus on the flaws, the faults in other people or situations. We've got a whole Jewish vocabulary for people like that right, they're the kvetchers, they're farbisenners, they're broyges, they're the drey kups, the nudniks, the yentas. All they can see is a glass half empty. Everybody else has got something wrong with them. They're always downtrodden, the world is against them. It's like the story I heard about these people who had new neighbors move into the house next door. Every morning as they sit at the kitchen table having breakfast they notice that the new neighbors are hanging out their dirty laundry. They sit at that table and watch disapprovingly, every day the wife says to her husband, "honey can you believe they are hanging up dirty laundry?" Well one day they sat down at the kitchen table and the laundry the neighbors were hanging up was bright and shiny and clean. She says, "Thank God, they finally learned how to do the laundry properly!" No honey, the husband said, I just got up early and washed our windows." Some people look at the world through filthy windows and all they can see is dirty laundry. And spending time with people like that can have an affect on us too. If you're friends sit around and speak *lashon ha'ra*, talk negatively about other people, gossip, criticize, find fault in everything, maybe it's time to get some new friends, or at least limit the time you spend with the negative ones. Because that negativity is contagious! It can soil our windows on the world, and affect not only our inner lives, but also how we interact with and treat others. "A *chissoren, de kalleh is tzu shein*," goes the Yiddish expression. For a fault finder, even a bride is too pretty! Watch out for those kind of people, they'll drag you right down with them.

Rather Judaism teaches us to be *dan le'chaf zechut*, to always give other people the benefit of the doubt. Don't assume that everyone is bad, that everyone else has got a screw loose, or that they'r enot the brightest bulb in the chandelier. Approach people magnanimously; be fair; look for the good in people instead of the fault. We are also taught *havei mekkabel et kol ha'adam b'seiver panim yafot*: Greet people with a positive countenance. This is a tough one, especially with difficult people. In my former congregation there was this woman who just didn't like me. For the life of my I couldn't figure out what I had done to upset or offend her. Truth is I hadn't had all that many interactions with her to begin with...My inclination was just to stay out of her way. But Sari would always say, just smile, say hello, don't feed into the negativity. Sari wanted to invite her to our home for Shabbat dinner one Friday night...unfortunately we never

got around to that before we moved. There is nothing more disarming to a negative person than someone who is gregariously happy! We are taught *al tadin et chavercha ed she'tagia linkomo*...Hillel said, don't judge a person until you have stood in their place. In other words, think about what's going on in their life...what are they going through right now; what's happening in their family, their marriage, their job situation that might be causing them to express themselves the way they are. Maybe what that person needs is more *rachmanus*, a little understanding and compassion rather than to be judged or presumed to be a certain way.

In just a moment we're going to turn to the *al cheits* in tonight's service. Surely this list will remind us of wrongs and offences we have perpetrated on others...but let's also take this time to think about how much space in our minds we rent out to negativity, cynicism, arrogance, and self-defeat. I think it's time to evict those tenants, and get our minds, our hearts, and our actions all lined up so that we can be the best possible version of ourselves in 5776.