

Rosh Hashanah second day d'var Torah
By Judith Heilizer

My angelic, excessively adored year and a half old, first -child -daughter sits snuggled on my lap as I tell her hesitantly and appropriately apologetically of her soon to arrive sibling. I paint a golden picture of her future joys of being able to be my helper mommy and how she will have a wonderful playmate and I sing song: 'we will love it and kiss it' and all that defensive stuff that we gurgled out under this circumstance of sheer betrayal. She listens attentively. Then she wiggles out of my lap and while she propels herself up the stairs she also singsongs: I will love it and I will kiss it, followed by : and I will throw it down the stairs....This was my horrific introduction into being confronted with the effects of my failure as a parent. (I did not know then that many more were to follow). But as to this, I struggled with it for a while until it had faded and I had nearly repressed it. Jeffrey, unsuspectingly, arrived at the appointed time. Though I harbored strong hopes for a future blissful sibling union between these two (despite Ruthy's information of intent), I nonetheless had enough wariness to purchase a foldaway crib that had a zip on top. I was profoundly grateful to Providence for having counseled me to do so, as I catch sweet Ruthy in the brief moment I had left her in Jeff's room, holding a hefty toy fire engine over his head singing: this is for you, Deffie, as she lets go and I catch it in mid air before it bounces on the zipped top. I can't describe the next incident in full detail, I do remember both of them sitting in the sandbox while Ruthy shoves spoonfuls of sand into Jeff's mouth, playing mommy as I had forecast so long ago. Ruth is not a killer, but a lovely, moral human being and kind to a fault adult, daughter, sibling and friend. The problem was that I had simply failed to see her where she was, a princess, not by choice, dethroned, also not by choice, and was told to love and kiss the interloper and to be happy, simply because I was. How awful, how lacking in empathy....

It is these smallish appearing sins with which I am concerned, in this case my failure to 'hear' my child.

It is these smallish sins of daily living for which we need forgiveness.

I have been thinking about our HH prayers. Is not all prayer about seeking forgiveness and repair? The liturgy is rife with these references. (umipney chatoenu, because of our sins,,, etc., etc.) So how and why do our HH confessions and search for absolution differ from the iconic belief systems in our innate flawedness?

Trying to understand this better I chose to look at the three HH confessionals: "Oshamnu", "Al Cheyt" and "Avinu Malkeynu" which form the cornerstones of our HH prayers and impact us in equal measure as do the majestic Kol Nidrei service and the hearing of the Shofar.

Of the three prayers (Avinu Malkeinu and Oshamnu and Al Cheyt) I chose to look at the Oshamnu prayer, mainly because of its terseness and lack of poetic shaping as compared to the other recitations.

And please know that these are just personal thoughts and reframe or discard if they don't make sense.

It seems to me that there are roughly 3 groups of acknowledgement and/or self-accusations in the 25 transgressions named in the Oshamnu prayer.

Group 1 cites that we falsify, gossip, lie, mock, neglect, quarrel, transgress laws, and are unkind. Though my take is not intended to be a justification for committing these infractions, these seem to have the flavor of being the price of living in community. We are all breathing one another's air from time to time

and we don't like it. This makes us defensive, causes us to feel that this "other" needs to be contained and warded off in order for us to have what we need. We all can relate to that I would imagine. Engaging on these offensive and defensive behaviors from time to time does not necessarily dub us to be bad people, only not so nice at that moment. And we probably have reasons for behaving in that way the great excuse being that others do it to us as well, in fact they probably started it. Not that big a deal. Repairable by talking it out.

Then there is the second, ramped up group of sins: In citing these we acknowledge that we abuse, betray, are cruel, embitter, hate, insult, jeer, oppress, pervert, and rebel. There is a greater and negative energy attached to these, a sense of possibly defensive, possibly proactive, behaviors on our part, when compared with the first group. In this group a negative use of our power dominates. We sense we would have to have been pushed pretty far to react in these ways. We might see ourselves not necessarily likeable but still righteous. Conversely we would tend to protect ourselves from people who act this way and to isolate them as unacceptable in a functional group.

The third group labels us as being violent, wicked, extremists, yearning to do evil, zealous for bad causes. This group is the most difficult one for most of us to identify with. I am not quite sure how to deal with these. These traits tend to fly in the face of what we hold dear and human.

We can step deftly around this dilemma by noting that we are talking about tendencies, possibilities under the right, that is wrong, circumstances and not likely to be perpetuated by us individually. But I am still uneasy about its personal applicability. So we pray that communal acknowledgement of possibility and repentance will offer protection from repeating these disavowed sins as well.

At the risk of stating the untestable and hence the unverifiable, I am drawn to speculate that the perpetrators of the severest kinds of sins (group 3) might initially well have been the subject of the smallish appearing sins most of us readily own. We might postulate that if sins are reactive to the experience of loss, real or imagined, the ramping up we see from the behaviors cited in group 1 to those in group 3, might be based in the lack of recognition and repair that is possible early on in the defensive schema and increases astronomically if untended. It is a terrifying thought.

It is seductive to look at the catastrophic cataclysms of history through this lens. From Egypt, the practice of slavery, to the Holocaust and countless other hostilities that have decimated humanity, these root causes of neglect of the needs of the other are not hard to trace.

But all of this is way too massive for contemplation here and now, it is the work for political scientists and philosophers. An explanation is just that, an opportunity for learning, it is not an excuse.

All this leads me to think that our personal work for doing tshuva lies primarily in the behaviors labelled in the first group, and less frequently but more importantly so in the second. The third group, while present of course, tends to be an outlier in what we call normal society. Nonetheless again, we accept group responsibility by intoning the personal pronoun: We....

What I am most concerned with is about the "little" things, our relatively ordinary and shared negative behaviors. And then there are those even smaller, barely perceived insensitivities in which we do routinely engage; "I do see your point clearly now", we say to the blind person, to the deaf: "I hear how stressful this is for you", to the immobile: "you just have to walk a mile in another's moccasins" and so on.

What these sins have in common is the objectification of the “other”, surely without physically or spiritually destroying them, but by leaving them emotionally wounded and exposed, unseen and unheard. It is about the harm we inflict in the spirit of a manufactured reality of our own rightness and deservingness. In so doing we have lost the discernment that would allow for the acknowledgement and recognition of the other. And blinded in this way, the “other” deprived of the opportunity for repair, can and well might react and hence perpetuate the chain of loss.

Our tasks are simple and doable. It is about the little things: aspiring to look at, be with and feel with others as we wish and need to be looked at by others. This is not about giving breaks, or forgiving, this is about active intention to be in this world connectedly and lovingly. It is about hearing ourselves clearly and clearly and take ownership of ourselves so we may become who we want to be to ourselves and hence to others. Because it is about little things, creating small changes usually isn't that big a deal. Setting ourselves achievable goals as we do in physical exercise, evaluating ourselves with kindness and realism, celebrating ourselves when we measure up and guiding ourselves back gently when we mess up, those are the steps. Nothing fancy here, no great insights or wisdoms, just hearing and being with the other as we are with ourselves.

This does not mean we have bleeding hearts, are not permitted to make judgements or draw conclusions or separate ourselves from sources of pain. It does mean that we need to stay attuned to ourselves as we do to the other. We routinize so easily, live off worn out belief systems, perpetuate disconnect.

We need to know that what is merely a desire, or even less so, a want on our part, may be a core need on the part of the other. We don't get to engage in the mathematics of judgement.

The woman is severely depressed. She dabbles in suicidal thoughts. She has lost the little black book which holds the addresses of all the people who care for her body, hairdresser, personal trainer, masseuse, diet consultant, wardrobe consultant, personal shopper, plastic surgeon and more. We hear of this, raise our eyebrows and pronounce her nuts. What we don't know is that she is a woman who has never tasted the dependability of connection, the joy of being wonderful and loveable to someone else, the joy of finding someone else wonderful and loveable. This little black book is her family. We do not get to judge.

We need to listen better, hear more, become more sensitively attuned to ourselves, to others. The subtle, automatic judgements we make. The sidelong, conspiratorial glance, the eye roll, the shared “knowing” glances, these are the “little things” which, when left untended grow in power and destructiveness. But these small, cheap victories we gain by overpowering the other turn out to be immensely costly. Given the worst of circumstances we are on a slippery road to turn to the sins of group 2 and possibly beyond.

We heal ourselves and the other when we replace attack or counterattack by sharing intentions such as: when you do this, it causes me to feel that way, and that is not alright with me. We, you and I, need to find another way. When we engage in this way, we neither accuse, nor attack or defend. We open the path to healing. And we invite the other the sharing of this path. Hearing the other for who they are, honestly, without distorting their behaviors through the sludge of our own unmet needs, this is our task. Helping others to hear us in this same way is our task as well.

Simple, mostly.

Let us practice forgiveness for others. Let us do the work that allows us to seek forgiveness for ourselves. Sins caused by lack of empathy or sympathy and our curtailment of the rights of the other by use of our power, need our attention and repair. The same holds for the sins we commit against ourselves. Generosity of spirit builds sturdy, dependable and well-traveled bridges toward Tikkun Olam. This is Tshuva.

This is my prayer:

Spirit

You gave us ways of knowing
hearing and seeing this perfect world
and all its creatures
the You within us

Bless us with the knowing of this