

THE SINS WE COMMIT AGAINST OURSELVES

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Ruth Calderon is one of the rising beams of light in the Jewish world. She is a teacher of Talmud. And she is a member of the Knesset. And the overlapping of those two facts are largely responsible for her meteoric rise in the hearts and minds of so many of us, because it was on the day of her inauguration into Israel's law-making assembly that she did something quite extraordinary. Instead of giving a boilerplate acceptance speech, she chose to teach a *midrash*, a story from the Talmud. No one had ever done that before — let alone a woman. What started out for most of those in the Knesset that day as a pro-forma speech that hardly anyone ever pays attention to, turned into a rousing ovation, and calls of *Yishar Koach* from the opposition religious parties, and soon went viral on YouTube. Here is the story she told:

Rabbi Rehomei, who devoted his life to Torah study in the academy of Rava in Mehoza, would spend the entire year studying Torah except for one day each year when he would return home to see his wife. On the eve of Yom Kippur. But one time he was so engrossed in his studies that he forgot to return home. His wife waited faithfully for him. Each time she heard footsteps she thought to herself, "He is coming, he is coming." But each time the footsteps went past her door. Finally, when she realized that he was not going to return, she grew weak and a tear rolled from her eye. At that very moment, Rabbi Rehomei was at the yeshiva on the roof. When her tear hit the ground, the roof collapsed under him, and he died (*Talmud Bavli Ketubot 62b*).

Dr. Calderon's purpose in telling the story was to remind Israel's leaders that as important as is Torah study, the Talmud is trying to teach us that everyday concerns — like one's responsibility to family (or country) — are even more important. And I have no doubt that that was the intent of the story. The rabbis were acutely aware that as essential as was the study of Torah, it was never intended to replace our responsibilities to the world. To each other. While the study of Torah might be, as we say each morning, equal to all other *mitzvot* because "...it leads to them all," Torah was never intended to replace those *mitzvot*.

But Rabbi Marc Angel of Congregation Shearith Israel, New York City's historic Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue, offers a somewhat different interpretation. Rabbi Angel suggests that perhaps the tear of Rabbi Rehomei's wife — whose name we are never told — was shed less out of the pain that her husband forgot about her and more about the fact that she had bought into this arrangement. This is what he teaches:

"When her husband failed her even on this one occasion, it dawned on her that her life had been a disaster...I don't think the tear from her eye was the result of her disappointed longing for her husband; rather, it was a tear of mourning for her own wasted years of life married to a man who had no real concern for her...Once Rabbi Rehomei's wife shed her tear, I think that was a great moment of clarity for her."

In other words, she realized that the greatest sin was the one she committed against herself.

And this is what I want to speak to you about this morning. We come here on this elongated night and day to consider our failures. No doubt there are many. The context of these sins — which in Hebrew are known as *chataim*, from *chet*, meaning to "miss the mark" — are not evil

deeds. Just failures. Things we might have done wrong. Or not done right. And the tradition differentiates between the sins we commit against each other and the sins we commit against God. This, I think, we all know. But the one thing that pretty much seems to be missing in the litany of failures we articulate in the *Al Chet* prayer are the sins we commit against ourselves. And they might be our most serious failures of all.

After many years of feeling unfulfilled at her job, Bronnie Ware set out to find something that resonated with her soul. She ended up in palliative care where she spent many years helping those who were dying. Some time later, she compiled a list of the 5 most common regrets expressed by the people she cared for. Here they are:

1. I wish I'd had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me.
2. I wish I hadn't worked so hard.
3. I wish I'd had the courage to express my feelings.
4. I wish I had stayed in touch with my friends.
5. I wish that I had let myself be happier.

They are, for the most part, predictable. On some level they all reflect a sense of profound existential disappointment. More than just regrets, they suggest that we are prone to live out our lives missing the mark — "sinning" against ourselves — so focused on objectives that seem appropriate and correct at the time but in retrospect are askew, off-target.

I often think back to the opening page of Harold Kushner's *When All You've Ever Wanted Isn't Enough* where he poses the question:

"Ask the average person what is more important to him, making money or being devoted to his family, and virtually everyone will answer *family* without hesitation. But watch how the average person actually lives out his life. See where he really invests his time and energy...Ask the average person which means more to her, the approval of strangers or the affection of people closest to her, and she won't be able to understand why you would even ask such a question. Obviously, nothing means more to her than her family and her closest friends. Yet how many of us have embarrassed our children or squelched their spontaneity, for fear of what neighbors or strangers might think."

Of course, one could argue that these failures, these sins, are ultimately "against" our family, our loved ones. And, to be sure, there can be no doubt that those we love, those we claim to care about the most, are the ones who suffer most from our actions. Nevertheless, I would contend that we are, in fact, sinning against ourselves, we are failing our own sense of who we are, of who we hope to be.

One of my earliest memories, I was maybe six or seven, happened in my backyard. I was with Ida Malian and Jerry Heron, two kids from my block. I don't remember exactly what happened but I said or did something that wasn't nice and got an immediate negative reaction from those around me. Either they hit me, or criticized me, or just up and left me. Whatever it was, it was potent enough that I can still recall thinking, "This isn't like me. I'm nicer than that." It was a profound realization. A dichotomy between my inner and my outer self. So strong was my sense of personal failure that I still remember it nearly sixty years later.

These are the most challenging of sins. Because there is no clear path to *teshuvah*. With sins against God, Yom Kippur atones. For sins against another, a word of apology or an act of rectification atones. But when it comes to our failures of self, when it comes to the sins we commit against ourselves what are we to do? It's easy to forgive yourself. You just dismiss it. You just rationalize it away. Or you express regret, feel bad for a while, until the internal sense of shame fades away. Except for those times when it doesn't fade away. When nothing we can do can allow us to let go of the negativity. And we end up living with it. Maybe for years. Maybe forever. And then, as our days grow short, we end up on somebody's list: *The Five Most Common Regrets of the Dying*.

It's an interesting list. Most are fairly predictable. Spending too much time on the things that really don't matter. Not spending enough time on the things that do matter. Not being true to myself. Not following my own dream. We all fail at these to some measure. But the one that really jumped out at me was the last: "I wish I had let myself be happier."

There can be little doubt that the value of happiness is preeminent in our world. Everyone wants to find happiness. How many times I've heard parents bless their child on the *bimah* and say, "Above all, I want you to be happy." Go up to anyone on the street and ask them what do you want from life and they will invariably say, among other things, happiness. And this is not some catch-all term for serenity, or peace-of-mind, or of a desire to return to a child's sense of simple joy. Happiness is a real thing. We know what we want. Because we all know, on some level, what it's like to be unhappy.

About three years ago Roko Belic made a very powerful film called "Happy". With the help of scientists and psychologists he traveled virtually the entire planet, from India to Denmark to Japan to sub-Saharan Africa asking people what it was they wanted from life and they all said they wanted to be happy. It is not cultural but human. Happiness is something all humans seek. It is something we need. Even more, contrary to popular wisdom, happiness can be measured. Through brain scans scientists are able to qualitatively distinguish the waxing and waning of neurons as people move in and out of the experience of happiness. Not surprisingly, dopamine is a major factor.

What the scientists also discovered is that, for most of us, about fifty percent of our happiness quotient is genetically based. This should not surprise us. We all know people who just seem naturally happy. And others who are not. Ten percent of the happiness factor is rooted in circumstances, the stuff that happens to us, the things that are pretty much out of our control. But the remaining forty percent are the things we can control. The scientists call it "intentionality". In our tradition we call it *kavannah*. Put another way, we are responsible, to some extent, for our own happiness.

Exercise is a major factor. Not merely caring for our body, but understanding that our state of happiness is directly related to the state of our body. When our body is happy, we are happy. Releasing those endorphins. But not just exercising to work up a sweat, but doing it to have fun. Playing.

Being in the "zone" or what they called "in the flow" is also an essential component. I've often used the metaphor of sailing, of catching the wind, of adjusting our spiritual sails to harness the *ruach*, as the definition of spirituality. *Ruchaniyut*. Whatever you call it, happiness seems to depend on our ability to be at-one with the world about us. People who like their jobs have a

better chance at finding the "flow", of getting into the "zone". Living our lives as if we are where we are supposed to be.

And then there's the factor of *how* we respond to the challenges of life. Everyone experiences adversity, but those who are able to recover quickly are more likely to find happiness. Those who refuse to dwell on what might have been, but rather see what can be. And contrary to popular opinion, money and material possessions have very little to do with whether or not we find happiness. While there's a big gap of happiness between someone who makes \$5000 and someone who makes \$50,000, what the studies show is that the difference between someone who makes \$50,000 and someone who makes five million is negligible. Put another way, the *extrinsic* goals so many of us embrace — how much we make, how good we look, how popular we are — have little to no impact on our emotional state of being, whereas the *intrinsic* goals — doing things to help others, loving and being loved, and feeling good about myself — make all the difference in the world.

And we know all this. But, as Harold Kushner points out, more often than not our actions belie our values. And happiness becomes elusive. And we hurt only ourselves. This is especially true when it comes to those intrinsic values, particularly the one about feeling good about who I am.

Some of you were here last week when we began these Days of Awe and I spoke about the sin of *enfearment*. Of making yourself afraid. Contrary to what most of us think, Nachman of Bratslav did not teach "The world is but a narrow bridge and the key is to fear nothing at all," but rather "Each person is required to cross over a very, very narrow bridge, and the fundamental principle is not to make oneself afraid." Big difference. And, as I taught then, the verb — *yitpacheid* — is reflexive. It's something you do *to* yourself. It is a sin against the self.

Not surprisingly, it is from the same Nachman of Bratslav that I offer a way to think about how best to respond to these failures of self. The fact is that much of what he taught was rooted in his own personal experience. Many scholars believe he suffered from acute depression, and his teachings can often be understood as a spiritual path out of his inner darkness.

One of Nachman's more famous teachings is called *Azamra*. It has been documented to a sermon he delivered on *Shemini Atzeret*, October 24, 1807. *Azamra*, which is Hebrew for "I will sing," comes from Psalm 146 (v. 2): *Azamra laylohai b'odi* — "I will sing to my God as long as I live." But Nachman reads it somewhat different. He understands the word *b'odi* literally, as "with the little that is left of me." And the little that he is referring to is "goodness". Even if there is but a very small amount of goodness in me, I am still worthy. I am worth celebrating.

Here is what Nachman taught:

"Know: You must judge all people favorably. Even in the case of a complete sinner, you must search until you find some modicum of good by virtue of which he is not a sinner. By finding this small amount of good and judging him favorably you elevate him to the scale of merit. You can then bring him to return to God...Some good point must be there...

"The same teaching also applies to the way a person relates to himself. You have to judge yourself favorably and find the good points that still exist in you. This will give you the strength...to recover your inner vitality and bring joy to your soul..."

And here's my favorite part:

"And so you must go on — searching and gathering together the good points [in you]. It is through this that *melodies* are made."

Nachman compares the human soul to a musical instrument:

"Thus, in playing a musical instrument — which is itself a vessel containing air — the sounds are produced by causing the air to vibrate. The skill is to move the hands on the instrument in such a way as to select the good vibrations...which make music..."

"When a person refuses to let himself fall, but instead he revives his spirits by searching out and finding his good points, collecting them together and sifting them out from the impurities and evil within him — melodies are made."

Melody is Nachman's metaphor for happiness.

Or, as Rabbi Tarfon would teach: *Eizeh hu ashir? Ha-samayach b'chelko*. Who is rich? He who is content with what he has. Or literally, he who is happy with his *chelek*, his portion.

Azamra laylohai b'odi. "I will sing to God with even the little [good] that remains in me." No one is without merit. No one is devoid of goodness. No matter what. And this awareness is the beginning of the discovery of happiness. The inability to recognize and affirm this truth is the worst sin we can ever commit. Lest we forget: We are here because God wants us here.

One of my favorite movies is *Topsy-Turvy*. It tells the story of the writing of Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Mikado*. At the end of the film, Gilbert — a character who is portrayed as never being happy — comes home to his always happy wife. Predictably, he is completely incapable of finding joy in the overwhelming success of his new masterpiece. It is she, however, who is able to put it into perspective and in so doing articulates the desire and need of us all:

"I should rather like to be an actor, upon the stage," she says. "An actor?" Gilbert reacts somewhat astonishingly. "Yes. Wouldn't it be wondrous if perfectly commonplace people gave each other a round of applause at the end of the day?"

"Well done, Kitty!" He says. "Well done!"

So it needs to be with us. This day, *Yom HaKippurim*, the Day of Atonement, is our "end of the day." Now is the time for us to look into the mirror. To see who we are. But if we are to succeed, then we need to look beyond the surface. We to look within. And find the good. We need to applaud ourselves. We need to find the good that is in us, to discover the merits which we have done, and say to ourselves first — and then to each other: "Well done! Well done!" Failure to do this will not merely deprive us of the happiness we so earnestly seek, it will be the gravest sin of our lives.

Azamra laylohai b'odi. I will sing to God with the good that remains in me.