Ani Acher - I’m not the same person  
Kol Nidre Sermon 5783

Something you may not know about me yet is that I love podcasts. I listen to a whole variety of podcasts with tons of different themes. I listen to politics podcasts, current events and news podcasts, story podcasts, science podcasts, and even a few comedy podcasts.

You might be wondering, how does he have time for all of that? One answer is that I've developed, with some serious training, the ability to listen to podcasts at 2.5 times the normal speed, sometimes even faster. Heather is convinced that I'm barely hearing anything when I'm listening too fast. And when my phone automatically starts playing a podcast when we’re in the car together it gives her palpitations and she thinks it sounds like chipmunks on speed. Which, to be fair, it does.

I listen so fast partially because there’s just too much content. The only way to even remotely keep up is to listen as quickly as I can. The other reason is because, for the most part, unlike music, which I also love, podcasts aren’t really about the aesthetic experience for me. They're about knowledge, new ideas, and new ways of thinking. So it’s ok to listen fast if that means I get more in a shorter time. I’m always excited to learn and think more.

One of my favorite podcasts these days is from the comedian Mike Birbiglia- it’s called “working it out” and the whole premise is he invites his comedian friends on to the show and they talk through some of their material, how they make their jokes, what inspires them or challenges them, and some of the theory behind comedy. So now you know the secret to why I’m so funny.

During the show, Birbiglia always asks his guests some more probing questions, which usually serve as a jumping off point for jokes or funny stories. One of his favorite questions is “Was there ever a time in your life when you were not your authentic self?” When Birbiglia answers, he usually talks about how there was a time when he was a kid when he wore a cowboy hat and just tried to be “Cowboy hat guy” as if that would make him cool and be a substitute for personality. Don’t worry, I’m not going to be the Rabbi in the Sombrero or anything like that.
But I love that question, was there ever a time in your life when you were not your authentic self. Was there ever a time in your life when you weren’t you. Or perhaps not the you that you are now?

More than a jumping off point for a comedic rant, this is a profound question for us all. Was there a time when you weren’t the you that you are now? Was that authentic?

For me, one of those times is apparently the me I was sometimes in college. I don’t think I was always this way, but I have a college friend that I only see once a year or less, who likes to remind me there was a time when I was super caustic and sarcastic. When I was really fun and hilariously funny, but also pretty harsh and intimidating. When I could be biting and mean, and my jokes and quips could be stinging barbs. When I did a really good job of bringing people in, and sometimes an equally talented job at making people feel excluded or that I didn't want or value their friendship.

I hate it whenever my friend tells me about me like that. I shudder and cringe. Partially because it’s mean, and partially because I don’t actually remember being like that.

Even more so, that’s not who I am now, or at least who I see myself as being now, so it doesn’t actually feel like a part of my genuine and authentic self. I don’t think I’m that person anymore, so that person doesn’t feel like me. I’m a different person from the person who did and said those things. Aren’t I?

I’ve been thinking about the difference between that old me and the me I am now a lot recently, not just because of the Yamim Noraim, but because of an amazing thing which happened in pop culture recently. Actually twice recently.

In case you don’t keep track of what’s going on in pop music, in June, the artist Lizzo released a single called Grrrls (spelled G-R-R-R-L-S), which contained what many understood to be an ableist slur, a slur that harms those who have physical or developmental disabilities. The backlash was swift, but amazingly, the apology and change was swifter. The song was released on a Friday, and by Monday, not only did Lizzo publicly apologize for using the slur, but she rerecorded the single, and changed the lyrics. In the span of 4 days, one of the most popular musicians in the world admitted her mistake, and quite literally changed her tune.

4 days. How long has it been since I was like that in college? How long did it take me to change?
In a bizarre and in some ways stranger than fiction kind of situation, that's not even the only time this exact situation happened this past summer. Beyonce, perhaps the most famous and iconic artist of our time, released a song titled Heated, that used the exact same slur in almost the exact same manner. The backlash was similarly swift, and within a week or two, an apology was issued and the song re-recorded with the offending lyric removed. She changed the tune and changed the record.

What strikes me about these incidents isn’t so much that they happened at all. People often say the wrong thing, even the same wrong thing, without giving it too much thought. It’s not even that they apologized.

It's that the song lyrics are now officially without the offending word. It’s like the slur has been stricken from the record. Unless you’re doing a deep dive and trying to find the older version of the song, it functionally doesn’t exist. It's as if it was never recorded. It’s as if Beyonce and Lizzo never sang those words.

Rambam, in his Laws of Repentance, writes that there are at least 6 different ways to repent for bad and regrettable behavior:

1. constantly call out before God, crying and entreatining;
2. to give tzedakah according to your ability;
3. to separate yourself far from the object of your sin;
4. to change your name, as if to say "I am a different person and not the same one who sinned;"
5. to change your behavior in its entirety to the good and the path of righteousness; and
6. to temporarily exile yourself from your home.

While each method has its merits, it's the fourth that I find most potentially potent. To change one's name, which is probably a little bit less about changing one’s name and really more about fulfilling the second clause of the halakha-כְּלוֹמַר אֲנִי אַחֵר וְאֵין אוֹתוֹ הָאִישׁ שֶׁעָשָׂה אוֹתָן הַמַּעֲשִׂים- As if to say “I’m a different person, I’m not the same person who did those bad deeds.”
It’s as if to strike the bad deeds from the record, or at least from your record. I’m not that person anymore. The person I am today could never have done those things. That's not a part of my authentic self. That wasn’t me being the me I am now.

Say what you will about the fact that both Lizzo and Beyoncé included the offending slur in the first place. Their apologies and actions, including literally changing the record and the lyrics, no longer benefitting from the original version, deleting the offending words, serve as a model for radical transformation. They are no longer the person who used those bad words in that bad way, and to a certain extent, that person doesn’t exist anymore.

While the example of these remarkably famous and successful women might be inspiring, I imagine that there are many of us who feel that that kind of power to change is out of our reach. I don’t have the machinery of a major recording label and army of publicists behind me whenever I make a mistake, whether in print or deed, so I can’t just re-record and change the tune. The things I’ve done or said that I regret, that I’d like to repent for, are too far back in the past and too set in stone to erase.

Of course, while at least as far as I’m aware, none of us are Grammy award winning artists worth tens or hundreds of millions of dollars, and if you are please let Neil Aronson know, each one of us has access to techniques and technologies that can allow us to make the same changes.

The very institution of Yom Kippur was created for this very purpose. One of the core verses, which is repeated over and over during the Avodah service says:

כִּֽי־בַיּ֥וֹם
הַזֶּ֛ה
יְכַפֵּ֥ר
עֲלֵיכֶ֖ם
לְטַהֵ֣ר
אֶתְכֶ֑ם
מִכֹּל֙
חַטֹּ֣אתֵיכֶ֔ם
לִפְנֵ֥י
ה׳
תִּטְהָֽרוּ׃

For this day atonement shall be made for you to purify you of all your sins; you shall be pure before י׳. (Lev. 16:30).

Yes, there is talk of purification, but the core word is yechaper- like kippur- atonement. According to virtually all biblical dictionaries and scholars, the word kippur- atonement, really has two possible meanings. The first is to cover, the second is to purge. When you cover something, with something else, you can’t see the original thing. It’s almost as if it's no longer there.

It’s as if to say I’m not that person who did those things. Of course, to a certain extent, I still am. As the ancient rabbis make very clear, the atonement that comes from Yom Kippur is only operative when you actually atone. Sacrifices to achieve purity are meaningless without
doing the right thing. When you seek out the people who you have wronged, apologize, accept culpability, make restitution and repair, and then earnestly and eagerly attempt to change your ways for the future. Only then can you say it’s as if I’m not the person who did those things.

It’s a little bit like sweeping the dirt under the rug. It’s still there under the surface but no longer visible, no longer necessarily relevant to who you are.

The other meaning, to purge, is a little more intense. When you purge something you obliterate it from existence. To purge is to destroy, to annihilate and nullify. To utterly remove. It’s not as if it wasn’t me who wasn’t that nice back then. It wasn’t me. I’m no longer that person, because that person, who said and did those things, no longer exists. The person who stands before you has made the changes necessary to be sufficiently different from the me before, so that I could never behave that way again. Rambam suggests that repentance is perfected when we encounter the exact same situation with the same people and do the right thing instead of the wrong thing. Because perfect teshuva is about changing the record, I couldn’t have made that mistake, because this time, I didn’t make that mistake.

If we are doing Yom Kippur right, if we’re taking teshuva seriously, at a minimum, Yom Kippur helps inspire us to do the work necessary to sweep our mistakes under the rug, never to be seen again, and at a maximum, it helps utterly destroy and strike from the record the bad we’ve done and the person we used to be.

Who needs the record labels or publicists, we have Yom Kippur. We don’t need public outcry on our grammy-winning albums. We have our friends and our families and our consciences to help us change swiftly.

It’s fitting that in a time when the celebrity apology is becoming all too common, and when it feels like all of our mistakes and missteps are done in public and enshrined in technological stone, that Apple's newest iPhone update includes a delete and unsend button for messages. Twitter is testing out an edit button for tweets. Perhaps these technologies are finally catching up to the ancient idea that we, too, need an edit button.

And notably, there are different ways of implementing these technologies. Twitter lets you see the edit history, meaning the mistakes are covered up, but if you want to dig deep enough, you can see them. Apple’s method is to totally delete them from the conversation. We
cover, or we purge, but either way, we try to ensure that what we said or who we were are no longer part of the record.

Of course, in our lives it's not as easy as just editing a tweet or hitting unsend, although we all wish it was.

That’s why Rambam lists out all of those methodologies, that’s why we gather together in shul and online. We know it's possible to repent, to do teshuva and return back to our more authentic selves, or to create those more authentic selves that we’d like to be. But it takes work. It requires tzedakah and good deeds to cover over the bad ones, it requires crying out, changing our behavior towards more righteous paths to truly purge the less savory parts of ourselves. But it took Beyonce a week or two, Lizzo a few days- we have the next 25 hours, and every remaining day of our lives.

As we enter this holy of holy day of potential change, we pray: Our God and God of our ancestors, help us find the strength to examine our deeds and ask the question- when were we inauthentic versions of ourselves- when were we people we’re not proud of. Empower us to find ways to edit and delete those behaviors, the courage to cover over and delete our harsh stubbornness and mean-spiritedness. Grant us enough hope and belief in you and ourselves that apologies do work, that by accepting responsibility and making things right we can get to a more authentic version of who we want to be. Compassionate one, help us change so we too can say: I’m a different person, I’m not the same as the one who did those things, who was that way. That wasn’t me, but let me show you and the world, who I am, and who I can be.”

Gmar Chatima Tova.