

Being Wrong
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Part I

Last year, Johanna Ginsberg went to the synagogue in Brooklyn where she'd celebrated her bat mitzvah in 1979. She hadn't been there in a number of years; this time, she was there to recite Yom Kippur prayers. The shul looked as though it hadn't had a facelift in a number of years—but actually, as someone at the shul told her, that was not a detriment; in fact, it made the place perfect for the occasion. Ms. Ginsberg went into the pews and together with hundreds of others, joined in chanting the Yom Kippur liturgy, singing out, "*Ashamnu!*" "*Bagadnu!*" "*Gazalnu!*" "*Dibarnu Dofi!*"

And then she heard a familiar word—a word you don't expect to hear in shul after chanting the *Ashamnu*—ringing out loud and clear through that sanctuary where she was davening. That word was: "***Cut!***" And then the voice continued, "Let's take it from the top, one more time: This time, just sing out the first three words, and mime the rest."



This took place not last September, but last *summer*. Johanna Ginsberg was there in shul dressed for Yom Kippur, reciting the Yom Kippur prayers—but not because it was Yom Kippur. She was doing this because she had been hired to serve as an extra in an episode of “*The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*,” an episode that was going to feature a scene in a synagogue on Yom Kippur.¹

Now, we think that it’s hard to be in shul all day on Yom Kippur. Well, it may be even harder to be an extra in shul all day working on just one three-minute scene.

It was a fascinating experience for Ms. Ginsberg. It helped her, as she put it, appreciate Yom Kippur more than she had previously. Why? Well, first of all, the group of extras, as you might expect, since they’d never done this before, kept making mistakes! They kept not doing precisely what the directors wanted done. So that meant take after take after take. To Ms. Ginsberg, this was a gentle reminder that *all* of us make mistakes

¹ <https://njewishnews.timesofisrael.com/atonement-take-nine/>. The episode that was being filmed was Season 2, Episode 7.

of a variety of kinds. She realized that it is a good thing that we have a way of apologizing for them.

Second, among the extras there that day was one person who really got on everybody's nerves. And everybody was stuck together with that person for hour after hour after hour. During the breaks, Ms. Ginsberg got to schmooze with her fellow extras, and, as the hours wore on, she found herself, well, *gossiping* about that particular person—at the same time, she realized, that she was confessing her sins, including the sin of *l'shon ha-rah*, or evil speech! It was a stark reminder how *easy* it is, how *natural* it is, to be unkind, and to violate the basic moral norms that we know we should strive to live by. It's a reminder: we all need Yom Kippur.

Finally, as Ms. Ginsberg and the group recited the Ashamnu not once, not twice, but many, many times, she began to feel, almost despite herself, as though she were actually in shul on Yom Kippur itself. Standing, beating her chest, singing out "Ashamnu." Sitting down. Standing up again, beating her chest, singing out, "Ashamnu." And so on and so forth. And that actually got her feeling regretful, contrite, and

focused on altering her behavior. In other words, saying the Ashamnu—again and again and again—worked.

Even though it didn't take place on Yom Kippur, and even though the only prayers she chanted all day were the Ashamnu and the Al Het, Ms. Ginsberg, much to her surprise, felt she got a lot out of the experience. That's good to know, because **she and the other extras had to show up at 7:15 am that morning, and they weren't released until 1:15 am that evening, 17 hours after they had arrived at the shul!** And we complain about how long services are! Can you imagine what it would feel like if we didn't get out of shul tomorrow night until after 1 am?

Part II

Why are we here? Johanna Ginsberg was paid for being an extra, but why are we here? We're here to draw strength from one another as we proceed to repeat together, again and again, "Forgive us, for we have sinned; pardon us, for we have transgressed." *"Ashamnu, Bagadnu, Gazalnu!"*

We're here to do *teshuvah*. Teshuvah, traditionally, has four steps to it: First, we have to **acknowledge** what we have done. Then, we have to feel and express **remorse**. Then, we have **resolve** to behave differently in the future; and then we actually have to **do** just that.

That first step, confession, can sometimes be the most serious stumbling block. Why is that?

Well, most of us assume that we're doing the right thing most of the time, if not just about *all* of the time. It can be a rude awakening to come to the realization that we don't always behave properly, that we are sometimes wrong.

As Moliere said, "It infuriates me to be wrong, when I know I'm right!"

Admitting that we're wrong is one of the toughest things that human beings do. I think that's because we don't think much of people who are wrong. [We don't like it when our doctor or lawyer or accountant is wrong; we don't like it when ANYONE we know is wrong.]

That's what comes to our mind, I think, when we make **moral** errors.

We don't want to acknowledge them because of what it will say about us.

There's a book that came out about ten years ago called, *Being Wrong: Adventures in the Margin of Error*, by Kathryn Schulz. She urges us to feel better about **making** mistakes and **admitting** them. The main reason is that, as she puts it, **we're wrong about what it means to be wrong!** It's not so terrible. As we all know, we can learn from our mistakes. In fact, Kathryn Schulz says that that's a *particularly good* way to learn.

Several decades ago, I broke some bones. I asked a doctor whether, once they healed, I had to be extra careful about them. "No," he said. "In fact, at least initially, they'll be even stronger at that point than they had been before."

That can be true of us when we make *moral* errors as well.

Maybe this is why Rabbi Abbahu in the Talmud says that “People who repent stand on a level even higher than that of the completely righteous.” (b. Sanhedrin 99a) People who do teshuvah: they’ve endured something really challenging; this may leave them stronger and more resilient.

If we acknowledge our transgressions; if we come to understand why we’ve made them; if we become convinced that we don’t want to commit them again; and if we actually alter our behavior so we don’t; then we will be much less likely to commit them again. In essence, **our moral skeletal structure will be strengthened by errors from which we have learned and grown.**

Kathryn Schulz points out that the key moment of growth is the moment when we realize that what we’ve done is wrong. She compares it to the coyote in those old Road Runner cartoons. I’m sure most of us have seen this. You know: Wile E. Coyote unwittingly runs off a cliff, and then suddenly realizes that there’s no ground beneath his feet, and *that’s* when he falls.

Realizing that we've behaved badly can feel like that. We get a sickening feeling in our stomachs. Oy! We're embarrassed. We have done something for which we have to apologize. We've made a mess of things. We've got to set this right. We are terrified—but that moment opens up a world of possibility. If we seize it, and do *teshuvah*, we'll be in better shape afterwards.

Perhaps the hardest part of this process is enduring the embarrassment we may feel when we contemplate how wrong we've been. Maybe that's why the custom arose of all of us getting up together, to confess *together* all of the sins in the alphabet. In any event, working through our embarrassment, pushing forward despite the guilt and the remorse we may be feeling, is the road to *tohara*, cleansing; and the road to *kapparah*, or atonement.

Part III

We are only partway through an all day marathon. We'll be sitting a lot and standing a lot. We'll be getting up to confess, and pleading for forgiveness, again and again.

If you take a look at that three-minute scene of Yom Kippur in the shul that took 17 hours to film, you'll see that, unfortunately, on screen, almost all of the lead characters seem untouched by their experience. Acting as if it were Yom Kippur had an impact on Johanna Ginsberg, but it doesn't seem to have had an impact on most of the lead characters.

Of course, that show is a comedy.

We, in contrast, are living in real life. We're ordinary people who are all, I'm sure, trying our best to get through life, trying our best to live up to our duties to God and to our fellow human beings; trying to hurt other people as little as possible.

Let's try to take full advantage of this incredible opportunity before us. Let's allow ourselves to sense the power that some of these prayers have to enter our hearts.

Let's try to help one another, this evening and throughout this extraordinary day, come together to admit to and apologize for our flaws, and to seek reconciliation, and a way forward.

Like Johanna Ginsberg, many of us walk into shul, and we sing an Ashamnu that's a performance. We should take heart. We have another eight takes to go tomorrow! Let's be encouraged by her experience.

Even though we may not be fully intentional at the start, it may come to be more meaningful to us of its own accord, as time goes by. Perhaps it will be the experience of chanting the litany together with 1,000 other people; perhaps it will be one or two particular sins that we come to realize really capture an issue that needs our attention; perhaps it will be the cumulative impact of reciting the text ten times.

Let's remember: we're not extras in someone else's production; we're the main characters in our own life story.

Let's draw strength from one another as we daven together, confessing our sins, and may this lead us to resolve to address them, and to turn aside from doing them again.

Most of all, may we learn and grow ... from being wrong.

L'shanah Tovah Tikateivu v'Teikhateimu: May we be inscribed and sealed for a year of goodness and blessing. Amen.