

## Atonement, Teshuvah and Other Lessons From Unexpected Sources

*Yom Kippur Morning 2009  
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The themes of Yom Kippur have to do with repentance and introspection. It is a time to review our values and priorities, to renew and restore our ties to our people and heritage, when our thoughts focus on *teshuva*, turning and of seeking forgiveness. We accomplish these difficult tasks of spiritual healing by being together as a community and through our individual acts of *tefillah*, (prayer), *teshuvah*, (repentance) and *tzedekah* (righteous acts of kindness) --- which explains why I want to speak this morning about Michael Jackson, Teddy Kennedy, Joe Wilson, Kanye West, Megan Fox, Bernie Madoff, Michael Jordan and Syrian rabbis.

Believe it or not, for one reason or another I think we can learn something from each of the individuals in this eclectic group of people about the meaning and message of this day.

People often ask me where I get my material and ideas for my sermons. As Will Rogers used to say, "All I know is what I read in the papers." I have an advantage over Will Rogers. In addition to reading the newspapers, I have access to the internet, as well as the Torah, midrash, Talmud, Jewish agadic literature, the siddur, the Rambam, medieval commentaries, Yiddish writings and a myriad of other sources, all of which I draw upon for inspiration and guidance.

There are times when an individual's actions are reflective of the kind of person they are, and there are instances when it is unfair for a person to be defined and judged based on one incident or event. The Talmud tells us, especially in regard to the Yom HaDin, the Day of Judgment that life is complicated. People are either predominantly guilty or predominantly innocent of wrongdoing, but most of us fall in the middle, and live our lives in the daily struggle of the balance between the two.

I am reminded of the story about an elderly gentleman who moved to Miami Beach. Shortly after he arrived, he was rocking on the porch of the home for senior citizens where he had just taken up residence. A woman sat down next to him and started pumping him for information. She wanted to know where he was from. Reluctantly he told her. She pried more information from him and wanted to know what he did for a living. He explained he hadn't worked in a very long time. Naturally, she asked why not. Eventually, he told her that he had recently moved south to Florida because he had just been released from prison. He thought that would quench her curiosity and that the conversation was over. It wasn't. She inquired and asked why he had gone to jail. Finally he blurted out that he did time for murder, had killed his wife, and had just finished his sentence of 63 years. The elderly woman, perked up, moved her chair closer to his and said, "So you're single."

It is pretty clear where he falls on the scale of judgment! It is pretty obvious where another individual stands as well. The recent spate of biographies about Bernie Madoff indicates that chances are he was primarily among those who are deemed not trustworthy. He had no sense of shame. Investigators as well as moralists and psychologists are still trying to figure out how this man could betray so many people, including longtime friends, poor retirees and charities, as well as wealthy neighbors and business associates, for decades. Recordings have been released showing him coaching associates under investigation how to lie and mislead federal investigators. We have learned in recent months that in addition to cheating his clients, Bernie Madoff was also cheating on his wife. I came across an interesting and insightful tale in one of the recently

published biographies about him. When he was a sophomore in high school Madoff and his classmates were each supposed to read a book and make an oral report in class. Bernie, an average student at New York City's Far Rockaway High in the early 1950s, hadn't gotten around to reading it. So when the teacher called on him, Bernie announced that he would cover "Hunting and Fishing" by Peter Gunn and proceeded to fabricate a detailed account of the nonexistent book. When asked to produce the book, Madoff turned deceit into virtue. He didn't have it, he innocently explained to his teacher – he had already returned it to the library -- the early makings of someone for whom deceit was a way of life. Indeed, for some people, their life is a consistent pattern.

Just the other day someone asked me, "I wonder what Bernie Madoff was thinking when he would sit in shul each year reciting the al Chet, the litany of sins one should refrain from doing." One can only imagine.

The Talmud, Masechet Brachot (63a) considers an interesting question. It contains a reference to Rav Poppa who claims that everyone knows that a thief before he commits his act will call out, "Rachamana. O Compassionate One." A debate ensues among sages speculating about the nature of the prayer. Does the thief pray because he is thinking, "Please God, although I am about to commit a sin that may result in violence or even murder, stop me from a greater crime than theft."

Or is his prayer, "Please God, give me the strength once this is over to get help and earn my place in the redemption of Israel. Stop me from doing this again." Or could it be that he was thinking, "Please God, this is not me. It is my evil inclination at work. Help me conquer it. Give me the wisdom to pull back, the skill to restrain myself, and the courage, confidence and optimism to turn away from my current path so I may begin a new life." It never occurred to the rabbis that the thief would be merely praying not to get caught. That's because the rabbis saw the scenario as a paradigm for us. All of us are guilty of moral lapses and of doing things wrong. The message of the season is rather than invent excuses to rationalize our actions we are better served when we are honest with ourselves and harness our resources and energy to turn in a different direction. As someone once commented on this passage, it brings the hopeful message that if God listens to the prayer of a goniff, maybe He will listen to my prayer as well.

Some fall into that category of being guilty. And then there are times when what seemingly virtuous people do is such a *shanda*, such a scandal it doesn't matter how much good they have done, it can all be wiped out by actions or crimes that are so heinous they outweigh their attributes. I am sure that the five Syrian rabbis who were arrested last month did many fine things in their lives, and they probably helped a lot of people during their careers. But whatever good they did is now eclipsed by the image of them being carted away in handcuffs for defrauding the government and engaging in illegal actions. Surely the rabbis of the Syrian Jewish community understood what they were saying when they were reciting the Al Chet prayer and while they were doing what they should not have been doing. Their hypocrisy and disconnect between outward appearance and private acts makes it hard for all of us who try to be good Jews.

Let me share with you a list, a guide you may find helpful of the top seven things to look for, signs that your rabbi was recently indicted:

7. He suddenly takes on the minhag of holding up his hand to cover his face when seen in public
6. Your Annual shul fundraiser now includes a vague reference about a portion of the funds raised being used for people who need kidneys

5. The coveted Shlishi aliyah goes to the top criminal defense attorney in your shul.
4. He informs the congregation he will be spending the rest of the summer "upstate"
3. The rabbi gives a series of Shiurim entitled: "Is it halakhically permissible to wear electric ankle bracelet monitors on Shabbat?"
2. The Rebbetzin is suddenly listed on J-date
1. His Sermon comes in the form of an Affidavit

Indeed, sometimes it is pretty clear cut where someone falls on that spectrum, as there are those who are clearly guilty. For some, the indiscretions outweigh the good. But for most of us life is usually far more complex and uncertain. This is why the Talmud recognizes that most of us are somewhere in the middle, with both our positive and negative deeds being in equilibrium.

If you think of Edward Kennedy you may associate him with the stirring words delivered the night he conceded his candidacy for the Democratic party presidential nomination to Jimmy Carter in 1980 when he said, "The work goes on, the cause endures, the hope still lives and the dream shall never die,"

The tremendous outpouring of sentiment when Teddy Kennedy died was a testament to the impact he had on this country and on how much he accomplished during his impressive career as a member of the United States Senate. He left his imprint on much of the legislation of the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that helped to improve the lives of many. In many respects he accomplished more than his brothers, including being the only one to die a natural death. The adoration and widespread acclaim coming from all quarters at the time of his death wasn't always there. There were times when he was vilified for the indiscretions of his personal life. He admits in his recently published autobiography that there was a low point in his life, a time when he was squandering his gifts and indulging in excessive womanizing, drinking and hedonistic behavior. As a result some maintain that they cannot forgive Senator Kennedy for the death of Mary Jo Kopechne at Chappaquiddick. He himself candidly confessed that it was a burden he bore the rest of his life. I raise it not to engage in a political or politicized discussion, but to make the point that a person is more than the sum total of any one incident in his or her life. I hope my comment is not misinterpreted. I don't mean it to be controversial, but am merely attempting to make the point and suggest that life is complex. He dealt with unimaginable pain, tragedy and loss by coming to terms with the direction his life was taking and instead of wallowing in self pity ultimately persevered and turned his life around to make a positive contribution. We can learn from an individual who had to deal with more hardship and challenges than any of us can fathom.

We often think that stars, actors, actresses and famous people are somehow different than the rest of us. They are not. In fact, they probably have even more insecurities than the rest of us. The same is true of politicians in need of constant adulation who seek gratification outside of their marital relationships. The beautiful young actress Megan Fox spoke recently on a morning talk show I saw about how nervous and unsure of herself she is. She admitted that her lack of self confidence is what probably drove her, like just about everyone else in show business into her chosen profession. They are more like us than we can imagine.

Some are good, some are bad, and most of us are in the middle. Even those who seem to travel in a different stratosphere breathe the same air as the rest of us and bear resemblances to our own struggles.

When basketball legend and superstar Michael Jordan was recently inducted into the Basketball Hall of Fame he was recognized as the greatest player to ever play the game. Yet in his speech instead of displaying graciousness he tried to settle past scores and petty slights. He famously did not make his varsity high school basketball team. So at his induction ceremony he wanted to be sure that the coach and Leroy Smith, the person who beat him out for the position were there in Springfield, as if to say and let them know, "I wanted to make sure you understood: You made a mistake, dude."

Granted this is all part of what made Michael Jordan Michael Jordan, what gave him the desire and drive to excel and to succeed. But success is not the same as inner happiness. None of us would want to live our lives in this unhealthy way.

We are all the products of our past, but on Yom Kippur we have a chance for a fresh beginning, to leave behind our petty grudges and past slights, not to let them get the best of us, to start anew.

Speaking of complex, look at Michael Jackson: brilliant, with millions of adoring fans around the world, but terribly insecure. A performer with a stage presence like there has never been before, yet basically very shy; and who knows about the other complicated aspects of the rest of his life. But one thing is certain. You can have everything and still feel empty. Michael Jackson had it all, but it was never enough. It never made up for the hurtful things his father had said about him when he was at a young and impressionable age. Walking through a store in Las Vegas, he pointed to things and said to just add it to his bill, not even aware of whether he had just purchased something he already owned.

None of the adulation, the record sales, the plastic surgeries, the excessive spending compensated for the childhood he missed out on and the hollowness he felt inside. As Michelle Singletary wrote in her financial advice column in the Washington Post, when people ask how is it possible for someone who makes \$200 million to be broke? Easy, she said, "spend \$201 million."

He wore a mask when he went out in public. His children wore masks. He wore a glove. Our rabbis liken Yom Kippur to Purim. They said that the two sound alike because the two days are similar and have much in common. Yom Kippur, can also be read and translated as *Yom Kimo Purim*: a day that is like Purim, for as they comment, on Purim we put on masks, whereas on Yom Kippur we take them off. That is what we should think about today, being honest with ourselves, before the Almighty.

The act of forgiveness is a reciprocal process involving two people: the one who has done the injury and the one who has been injured. But whether we are asking for forgiveness or giving it to others, it is one of the first "morality" lessons we learn as human beings. Because from the moment we begin to assert our autonomy, independence and free will, we will inevitably do things that hurt others.

Congressman Joe Wilson impudently and rudely shouted out while the President of the United States was speaking to a Joint Session of Congress, "You lie." He later apologized. Or did he? He said, "The Republican leadership thought I should apologize so I did what they asked of me." Doesn't sound like too much of an apology to me, does it? Sincerity matters. He wound up being rebuked by a vote of the House of Representatives for his rudeness. One of his fellow South Carolina Republicans, who voted against him said, the whole "problem could have been fixed by an apology to the House." Many of the problems we encounter in our relationships could be fixed if there were a simple apology in the home.

In an article about apologies Amy Lederman wrote, “to be human is to be flawed. We err, act without thinking, and react out of anger, frustration and indifference. It is impossible to be in relationship with others and not hurt them at some point along the way.”

We all do foolish things. That’s what apologies and Yom Kippur are for. Kanye West may have been caught up in the emotion of the moment at a recent music awards ceremony. He jumped up on stage grabbed the microphone out from the hand of a young singer and started to express his own personal opinion about who was more deserving of the award. As comedian Jimmy Fallon asked, where was he when we needed him: when Qadafi was speaking for 95 minutes at the UN last week?! He subsequently expressed regret for what he did. He apologized to Taylor Swift’s mother, and eventually to the singer herself. Seeing him later, after all the abuse heaped upon him, he appeared trembling and remorseful, truly regretting what he had stupidly done.

We all do stupid things. The question is do we have the courage to admit that and to apologize when we do.

For many of us it is not easy to ask for forgiveness. For some of us it is not easy to grant it. Perhaps it is because we have difficulty forgiving ourselves. All too often, *both* parties feel that they are the injured person and that it is the other person who should apologize. Jewish tradition offers great wisdom and practical advice. As stated numerous times in the prayers we read today, beginning with the Biblical model of Divine forgiveness, we are taught that man sins and God forgives. It is a role model and paradigm we can follow. In order for God to forgive us, all we have to do is: acknowledge our wrongdoing, cease from doing it again and take action to do better in the future. That is the message of the High Holidays; the idea that God will forgive us when we engage in sincere *teshuva*, or repenting and returning to God. Our liturgy affirms this throughout the prayers we recite when we say together, as a community, prayers like the *Al Chet* acknowledging that we have all erred. But then we are reminded that through repentance, sincere prayer and acts of charity, God's decree and judgment will be tempered.

For the wrongs we commit against one another we must seek forgiveness, not from God, but directly from the person we have hurt. Jewish law mandates that if someone has hurt you and sincerely asks for your forgiveness, you must forgive that person. Because of the human tendency to hold on to our resentments, there is a special reward for one who freely forgives. The Talmud tells us: "For the person who overcomes his natural tendencies and instead forgives, all of his sins are forgiven."

Atonement makes us whole in spirit because when we engage in the act of forgiveness, we better understand what it means to live with compassion.

Rabbi Shaul Rosenblatt writes that Yom Kippur is about stopping the blaming and starting to take responsibility. On Yom Kippur, we stand before God, hand on heart and say, “God: it's not your fault.” We take responsibility. We are not who we should be, so life is not what it could be. We are the problem in the relationship, not You. Hard as it might be to accept responsibility for the problems in a relationship and begin the road of reconciliation. It is powerful because it lifts you out of your own pettiness and towards the realm of greatness. This is Yom Kippur, a day of judgment and thereby of reconciliation between the pure human soul and its Father in Heaven, it is the highlight of the year. We probably don’t really want God to take away all of our challenges, for confronting and overcoming challenges is what gives us our deepest sense of personal fulfilment. If God filled our lives with more and more goodness, chances are we would

fail to appreciate it the same way that we fail to appreciate all the goodness that we currently have.

Too often we determine our opinion about another based on one thing. Yom Kippur comes to remind us we are all accountable for our deeds. But it also tells us to let go. Let go of our preconceptions and misconceptions. Let go of our tendency to be harsh and judgmental of others. Give people the benefit of the doubt. Too often we hold grudges and retain our anger towards someone long after whatever hurt we felt at the time is long gone.

My message is that we should be far less judgmental of others, and harsher on ourselves. It is a natural tendency to act this way. I think of the cartoon I saw which had someone in heaven typing into a computer the name of a loved one. The program on the screen was called "Google Heaven Directory". The angel assisting the man said, "It's a new program we just got. You type in someone's name, and it tells you if they are up here or not."

We have no way of knowing what goes on in another person's life and how they will be judged and for that matter, who makes it into heaven. That is why I love the advice of the Musar, the Ethics movement of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when it advised us to worry about saving our neighbor's body and our own soul rather than saving our neighbor's soul, and taking care of our body. In other words, we should be more understanding, magnanimous and forgiving towards others. It is ourselves we should be harsh on. It is our shortcomings we should seek to correct. This is what we can change.

Teddy Kennedy wrote in his memoirs, "Atonement is a process that never ends. Maybe it's a New England thing, or an Irish thing, or a Catholic thing. Maybe all of these things."

And I would add, maybe it's a Jewish thing as well.

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