

In Search of Sin

Sermon by Rabbi George Gittleman Yom Kippur 5769

Tonight I want to go in search of sin. That's right – "sin." You see, we liberal Jews do many things well, like sex for example... That is to say, we can handle the topic of "sex" in a relatively open, honest, and I believe, healthy way. "Sin" on the other hand, is a subject that rarely if ever comes up in non-Orthodox Jewish settings. It's a word that seems not actually to be in our vocabulary, except if you come during the holy days. And while I really... I love seeing everyone, and whenever you come you are welcome, I feel bad for you folks that only come during the Holy Days, because it is so much heavier. Trust us, if you come on Shabbas we won't talk about sin. A point of fact: I have never in my 13 years as a rabbi here, and 5 years as a student rabbi serving a number of congregations... it's actually fun to say where I was: in New Iberia, Louisiana (God love those people); in Jonesberg, Arkansas; Carry, North Carolina; and I spent two summers in Alaska, with Laura. And never once, in all those years, did I ever give one sermon about "sin".

Of course, there are reasons for our relative silence. For one, the word "sin" is over-determined in English, carrying all the weight and connotations of Christian theology – and for Christians that is fine, but it is challenging for Jews. So, Original Sin, sin as death, sin and salvation through Jesus...that is a significant stumbling block for any Jewish conversation about sin. Another related issue is the challenge of translation. In Hebrew the word for sin is khet, or khatat or khatah which though translated as "sin" comes closer to "to miss the mark," like the root word of an archer who misses the mark. "Missing the mark" just does not get internalized into the English sense of the word "sin".

In other words, a Jewish conversation about sin must confront problems with language and theology. I think there is more however. Our aversion to "sin" goes much deeper. In the final hour, and this is that final hour, khet/sin, in Hebrew, in English, in any language, is about three things: relationship, responsibility and shame. And when that web of connectivity breaks down, the web of connection between relationship, responsibility and shame, we all suffer.

In fact, sin is a painful subject, and any sane person seeks to avoid pain if we can. But in the case of "sin" without pain there is no gain, no hope for what this day is all about, atonement and "at-one-ment", reconciliation with the various parts of ourselves that make up who we are.

Besides, even if we'd like to talk about the weather, the liturgy is very persistent this time of year if you haven't noticed– al khet sh'hatanu lifanekha... For these sins that we have committed; Avinu Malkenu, khatanue lifanekha... our Father our King we have sinned before you, we just read about all of those sins we have done collectively. So even if we wanted to talk about

something else we would still find ourselves confronting the concept of “sin” in our machzor, our prayer book. Our Tradition is telling us something, so why not try and understand its message; let us go together in search of “sin”.

Well since we are searching, we might as well start in the beginning with the story of Adam & Eve, or what Christianity often refers to as “Original Sin.” The story of Adam & Khava (that is Eve’s name in Hebrew, Adam’s as well) is actually quite complex and almost universally misunderstood.

We won’t explore the story in full this evening, but I do have a few questions for you: For one, if God did not want Adam & Khava to eat from the tree of the knowledge of Good & Evil, why did God put the tree in the middle of the garden? Really? Why not put it on the side, or hide it somewhere? You can imagine telling your kids not to do something and then hiding it; but say to your kids...not to eat some candy, and then put it on the table in the middle of the room and then leave? What are they going to do? They are going to eat it!

Okay, a more important question is what would life be like if Khava hadn’t taken that first bite? Think about this. Boring! It would be no life at all. No, I am serious! No desire, or yearning, pain or exaltation, true love or love making and most important of all, no opportunity to become moral beings. It is precisely “The Fall” from “The Garden” that makes life as we understand it possible. We could not be fully human in “The Garden.” Khava which means “mother of all life,” gave us life by eating that forbidden fruit. We now should get on our knees and thank Eve for eating the fruit!

Judaism more or less rejects the standard reading of “The Fall”. Nevertheless, there are a few things we can learn about sin from its study. Remember, I said just a few minutes ago, that sin was about the matrix between relationship, responsibility and shame or regret. The main relationship in the tale is between God, Adam & Khava. Their “sin” is: disobeying God’s command. That’s pretty obvious. Shame is also central to the tale – what happens after they eat of the apple? The text says God opened their eyes, they could see each other and that they were naked, and they went to put clothes on. In other words, they were ashamed. As for responsibility well, they’re a little weak on taking responsibility. God has to actually come “down” to the Garden and call them to account. This is from the Torah: “They heard the sound of the Lord God moving around in the Garden.” (I wonder what that sounds like? I bet pretty scary. It would make Jurassic Park seem, you know, very mellow...) “It is a breezy time of the day, and Adam & Khava hid from the Lord.” How to hide from the Ground of All Being? “The Lord God called out to Adam and said, “Ayekah/Where are you?” You have to ask the question here: Why does God, need to ask Adam where Adam is? The Alter Rebbe, one of the followers of the first Hassidic Rebbe the Baal Shem Tov, has a great answer. He points out: Gods is not asking Adam where he is for God; Gods’ asking Adam for Adam, “Where are you Adam? Where are you?” In other words... what have you done? Ayekah? That’s a great question for us on Yom Kippur – where are we? Are we where we want to be? Ayekah? Where are we? So we see in this not so simple tale of Adam and Eve the matrix of sin – relationship, responsibility & shame.

The next story that follows Adam and Eve is Cain and Abel, and again we see the matrix of behavior and consequence. Cain kills Abel...I'm going to move fast through this story. It is another complicated story by the way. You have to come to Torah study for a full exploration. Cain kills Abel, violating, you would say, his relationship with Able... but also with God, who in this tale is the Divine parent. Really, if you look through this story, God is like the parent that leaves two kids in the kitchen with an armed gun in the drawer, and then oops, something really bad happens. Cain, like his biological parents, Adam & Eve tries to shirk his responsibility. What does he say? – “Am I my brother’s keeper?” And, once God busts him he must live with, “the mark of Cain”, nothing less than a metaphor for shame.

Relationship, responsibility & shame, this is the anatomy of sin. Let’s see how it applies to our times and our lives. We’re going to start with a very difficult subject, even more challenging for us to discuss than “sin”, but as grave a sin as any one can imagine – torture.

Torture is against the Geneva Convention and International Law. Torture is perhaps the starkest example of what happens when the connection between relationship, responsibility & shame brakes down: “The act of torture destroys ordinary social bonds and relationships...the torturer engages in what Harvard professor Elaine Scarry calls, ‘the unmaking of civilization.’” (George Gessery, “The Orgy of Power”, Northwest Review)

There is no sin greater than the sin of torture, there should be no greater shame than the shame of being party to torture. Yet where is our shame? Where is our cry of anguish, regret, remorse? Where is it?! What am I talking about? You are probably saying “I didn’t torture anybody.” I am referring to the fact that our government, in our name is torturing people, in Guantanamo, in Iraq, in Afghanistan and in other detention centers we know little about.

I’d read about the accusation of torture by US officials since Abu Gharib, but it really didn’t get to me until I heard the hearings last year for our current attorney general who, while willing to call water boarding morally repugnant was not willing to describe it as torture, or an illegal interrogation method. Do you know what water boarding is? It’s drowning someone over and over again. Right before they drown, you get them out of the water. So, there are many ways to do it. One is to tie them on a board, that’s why it is called water boarding, and forcibly pour water in their nose and their mouth until they almost die. Another is to tilt them back into a barrel of water until they almost drown. And there are various other ways it can be done.

Do you know when this technique was first discovered, invented? In the Spanish Inquisition! And if you Google “images/water boarding,” you’ll find a nice wood cutting from the 14th or 15th century of some inquisitors. And there is a guy on that board. And the chances are that the guy on the board being tortured is a Jewish guy. In fact there are chronicles of Jews who were water boarded during the Spanish Inquisition and I am sparing you the reading of them.

And water boarding – near drowning, over and over again is just one of many abuses not even disputed by our government. I got physically sick doing the research for this sermon. I was tempted to read some of the transcripts from US interrogation sessions – torture sessions. I’ll spare you the details. But, lest you question the basic facts that our government is implicated in the torture of detainees, I’ll quote retired U.S. Major Gen. Antonio Taguba, who led the Army’s

investigation into the Abu Ghraib prisoner abuse scandal in 2003. He wrote in a preface to a document submitted to Congress June 16th of this year, “There is no longer any doubt that the current administration committed war crimes,” “The only question is whether those who ordered torture will be held accountable.” (Rachel Kohn-Troster, RHR Web page)

We don't like the language of sin, but by relinquishing it to others we allow them to define its meaning in distorted and even dangerous ways. How is it, for example, a sin for a same sex couple to marry but not a sin to torture a prisoner who, by our standards, which we're very proud of, is innocent until proven guilty? By the way, according to the Red Cross, 70% to 90% of the detainees at Abu Gharib prison were there by mistake! Who knows the story at the other less known or scrutinized facilities in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere! Where is our shame? Where?

For the sin which we have committed before You for averting our eyes.

For the sin which have committed before You for closing our ears.

For the sin which we have committed before You for the suffering and torture committed on others.

For the sin which we have committed before You with our full knowledge or without our knowledge.

For all these sins, forgiving God, forgive us, pardon us, grant us atonement.

May we also gain the strength, courage and determination to demand of whom ever gets elected president that they stop torture by our hands and in our name! You know, regardless of what happens in this election, this is one issue that I think both men will want to work on. And I am thankful for that. For different reasons, I think both candidates are going to want to stop torture in our name. But we need to make sure. We need to make sure, and as you go out you are going to see that there is an interfaith group working on this for the religious community. You can sign up, you can get involved, we can make our voices heard.

You know, I wrote this sermon before the financial meltdown we are in the midst of. And I know we all need sanctuary from it. So I am not going to talk about it. Right? You don't want to hear about it. But I just want to point out you could not ask for a better illustration of what happens when the matrix between relationship, responsibility and shame breaks down – right? Evil arises, and in this case in the form of shameless greed that might bring us all down.

I want to narrow the angle of our lens from the National scene to our community; specifically, I want to talk about another very difficult subject: Mental Health Care in Sonoma County. I think what is happening qualifies under my definition of “sin”; when the connections between relationship, responsibility and shame break down.

Sonoma County's mental healthcare system has been in the news quite a lot in the last year or so, because of what most describe as the collapse of the system all together. Last June, the county shut down Santa Rosa's Psychiatric Emergency Services, the Norton Center; and this February Santa Rosa Memorial Hospital closed its psychiatric hospital on Fulton. They couldn't afford to keep it open. (The Bohemian, 6/25/08).

In addition to the bad news about hospital closures, there have been an alarming number of deadly encounters between Sonoma County law enforcement and the mentally ill. In one incident, a distraught teenager was shot to death. When I mentioned to Laura, who works at Kaiser and is in health care, that I wanted to connect 'sin' to our mental health system she said, "It's not a sin, its murder!" Without the facilitates or the resources to care for the mentally ill, more and more of the burden of care falls in places simply not able to cope – Emergency Departments (where Laura works), law enforcement, jails, the streets. "Murder" may seem a little harsh, but in fact, mental illness if untreated is deadly.

For many, this is not a personal issue – you have no relationship to, or with people suffering with serious mental illnesses. For others, though here tonight this is very personal; you or your loved one has had to go it alone or get shipped out to somewhere else in the greater Bar Area. Either choice is a terror for someone who's already terrified by life. And, even if you have the resources, such a dislocation from your home is a severe hardship. Let me tell you a few stories to illustrate my point. These are all true stories.

Imagine your elderly father due to a medication error has a complete mental breakdown. His only hope for treatment is a facility in San Francisco! But he lives in Santa Rosa. What about his wife for over 50 years? Where will she stay? How will she visit? She doesn't drive any more. What about the transition home? You just bring him back up, and if there is a problem you run him back down? It's a long drive. Who's going to drive him? He is not fit to drive! His kids work. This happened to one of our members not too long ago. How about this? Your otherwise healthy teenager starts to hear voices and is soon not safe to himself or his family. The closest facility for him is in Vallejo!! If he can get in! Imagine, those of you with children – what do you do? Quit your job and rent a hotel room close? What if you have other kids in your household? What if you can't afford to leave your job? But it's your son? What do you do? This is also a situation very close to our home.

Okay one more example, and this is from Laura not from me. A colleague of her's son is in his early 20's, bright, talented – he actual has a law degree – but also seriously mentally ill and when he stops taking his medications, he gets sick. So to make a long story short, he stopped taking his meds, and was picked up by the police and thrown in jail – but he's not a criminal, he's mentally ill. What he needs is to get back on his medication. In jail he gets sicker and sicker, because they can't make him take his medication. And they punish him more and more severely for the violations that he does while he is in jail. You know we could make the jail a scapegoat; we could also blame law enforcement. But they're not trained mental health professionals. The jail is a jail! It's not a mental health facility, and that is precisely the problem, we don't have a facility. But it's your son...What are you going to do? What are we going to do? What can we do? You

realize right now, God forbid, someone could have a heart attack and there are three hospitals ready. But if you have a mental break down and you need help, there is nowhere to go, nowhere to go in this county.

Khatanu l'fanekha, we have sinned before You, by not paying attention and by not caring enough about the most vulnerable in our society to do anything to help them.

At this point you might be fairly asking yourself, "Rabbi why did you bring us these huge unsolvable problems? What can we really do to make a difference?" I struggle with this. And this is why.

I brought these two problems to you because evil flourishes in the dark, silence is sin's side kick. Part of being a person of faith is believing that if we shed the light of humanity on a problem, that alone can lead toward a solution; awareness is the beginning of change.

Advocacy is also important. You know, politicians care about public opinion. Our votes do count, our voices if we use them can make a difference.

I want to know narrow the focus even more to ourselves: the realm of the personal. Is "sin" as I have defined it meaningful? I think so because in the end, it is all about relationships – with other people – those our government tortures, or the mentally ill, or God. It is from a sense of connectedness that a feeling of responsibility arises, and then if we blow it, a sense of shame. It's like one of those kinetic sculptures where you drop the ball in one spot and, if all the pieces are connected, the ball moves from one place to another. That connectivity is really the essence life as far as I can tell.

So let me ask...how connected are we in the congregation, at work, or at home? I ask because when the connections break down, we are more apt to hurt each other. We are more apt to sin. And the truth is I don't think over all we are very connected. You can live for decades in the neighborhood and not know anything about what your neighbor really cares about. I mean, how many of us really know our neighbors; could talk about real issues with them? Some, some, but I don't think very many. How about your coworkers? If you work at Shomrei Torah, we know ourselves too well. But otherwise, do you really know your coworkers, what really matters to them. The congregation, we think of ourselves a khemisha place, a warm welcoming place. By the way, have you ever met the congregation that thinks they are really nasty people? It doesn't exist. And I think we are khemisha, but how deep are our relationships?

I am proud of Shomrei Torah, and I think that the relationships we have are often very thin. I think they could be deeper, that's why we are starting Communities in Conversation, so we can deepen the relationships we have, find out what people really care about, and then maybe let our voices be heard. And one last question: how connected are you to your family? Do you know the emotional map of your children, of your spouse, of your siblings? It's a good time to ask that question, and it is a good time to say, "in the New Year I will do better."

How about our relationship with God or, if you prefer, our higher self, the part of us that demands more from us than simply what our personal need dictates? The more connected we feel, the more personal responsibility we take and when that happens we are more able to hear our own voice of conscious, saying, hatati lefinkha, I, I have sinned before You, what can I do to fix it.

I'd like now to conclude, where we began, in search of sin in the Garden of Eden. There we found that sin was bound up in relationship, responsibility and shame. But life in the Garden was no life at all, thus Eve, who is often seen as the perpetrator of "original sin" is in actuality, Khava, "the mother of all life". To live is to be in relationship and relationships of any kind are a messy business. Failure in one form or another, is a given; it's how we respond that is so important; do we allow ourselves to feel shame, can we take responsibility?

Khatanu l'fanekha, we have sinned before you. What else is new? The question is, will we recognize it for what it is and do something about it in the year ahead.