

## Sin and Disconnection

*Yom Kippur 5769*

What are we to make of the ancient ritual, the *yom hakippurim*, ‘day of atonements,’ which we just read about in the Torah? How might we—or can we—connect it to what we are doing here today on our Yom Kippur?

The rituals described in this *parasha* provide a window into very ancient notions of sin and atonement. The first thing to note is that, for the priestly writers of the book of Leviticus, the major concern is with a state of ritual impurity, a kind of contamination of the holy sanctuary. Looking at the Biblical narrative in its ancient Near Eastern context, the scholar Jacob Milgrom notes that “Impurity was feared because it was considered demonic...[I]mpurity was a physical substance, a miasma that possessed magnetic attraction for the realm of the sacred” (*The JPS Torah Commentary: Numbers*, p. 445). Periodic ritual cleansings of temples were thus needed, to clear away this harmful impurity and make the temples fit for the gods once more.

Whereas impurity was considered demonic in neighboring religions, for the ancient Israelites, it took on a different meaning. In the Torah, it was the actions of human beings—not demons—that caused defilement of the sanctuary, the realm of the holy. A person could cause impurity unwittingly, for example through certain bodily emissions, as well as through more intentional sins against God or fellow human beings. If the level of impurity in the sanctuary got too high, then God’s presence could not abide there. Thus the rituals of Yom Kippur were the means by which the priest, on behalf of the community, restored the holy sanctuary to a state in which God’s presence could safely dwell among the people. But even more: the people themselves—who, like the sanctuary, were holy—needed to be purified, to have the result of their inadvertent and conscious sins banished into the wilderness, carried off by the scapegoat.

The word we use in the Yom Kippur confessional, *hey*, is an echo of the two goats used during this purification ceremony. They are called *se’i’rei izim l’hattat*—“kid goats for a *hattat*-offering.” This same root, *hatta*, is what we recite so many times over this day: *Al hey* *sh’hattanu l’fanecha*—translated in our machzor as “For the wrong we have done before you.”

But despite the similarity of words, there is little else we do that has anything in common with the ancient Biblical ceremony. No ritual sacrifice, no scapegoat, no high priest or sanctuary to make pure. What is the relationship, then, the thread, that ties together this millenia-old ritual of our ancestors and what we’re doing on this day? What is it that we’re asking for forgiveness for? What are we confronting within ourselves, and how is it to be confronted?

Let’s begin with that phrase: *Al hey sh’hattanu l’fanecha*... That ancient word, “*hey*,” is usually translated as “wrongdoing” or “sin.” Looking through the Selikhot prayers for forgiveness in our *machzor*, I found a whole thesaurus of terms for “sin,” including: *avon*, *hey*, *pesha*, *asham*—variously translated as wrongdoing, sin, transgression, evil deeds. Of all the English words used in the Selikhot prayers, and in our discussions of Yom Kippur, probably the most difficult for many of us is the word “sin.” “Wrongdoing”—okay, I can deal with that, everybody is wrong some of the time. “Transgression”—it’s a little strange-sounding, but there are lines that

shouldn't be crossed, and transgression means crossing certain boundaries in ways that cause harm—that's understandable too. But "sin"? Is that really a Jewish notion?

I'm not wedded to the word "sin" per se, but I do think it might be interesting to explore a bit what lies behind that word, and why our reaction to it is often so visceral and negative. It might be that it's just so harsh—a "sin" sounds so total, so evil, beyond the realm of wrongdoing that most of us think of ourselves as inhabiting. In a culture that is predominantly Christian, the word "sin" has religious connotations that are alien to Jewish thought, which I'll explore in a moment. There's also something permanent-sounding about "sin," like a stain that you just can't remove. Do we sin? Is sin something we have to be worried about?

In his entry on "sin" in the volume *Contemporary Jewish Religious Thought*, a kind of encyclopedia of Jewish concepts, Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz makes this somewhat surprising claim:

"Despite the existence of so many definitions of an endless variety of sin, and despite the stern reproof voiced against sin and sinners, sin itself occupies an insignificant place in Jewish thought." (p. 881)

Steinsaltz goes on to discuss how sin, in Jewish understanding, does not really have its own independent reality. This is quite different than the notion of sin in traditional Christian theology, especially the notion of "original sin." In Judaism, sin is neither an essential nor inherent quality of human beings. We do possess, according to Jewish tradition, a *yetzer ra*, a tendency or urge towards evil. But it is precisely that—a tendency or capacity, not an independent force or fatal flaw. The *yetzer ra* is understood to be a creative and a procreative urge, and can be channeled in ways that are not destructive. It is more akin to the Freudian notion of the id than the Christian notion of original sin.

So what do we mean, as Jews, when we talk about "sin"? Steinsaltz's approach is quite intriguing. Here is what he says:

"The problem of sin (and even, to a large extent, the problem of evil) is, in effect, treated as a secondary issue. Sin is viewed as a correlate of *mitzvah*; it is treated not as a separate, independent entity but rather as a shadow-essence or even, at times, a reverse image of *mitzvah*. The concept of sin and the attitude taken toward it thus stem directly from how *mitzvah* is understood." (ibid)

Steinsaltz goes on to discuss the various ways that Jewish thinkers have understood the concept of "mitzvah," and what that means for our definition of "sin." If *mitzvah* is primarily seen as obedient response to a divine command, then sin means rebellion, a rejection of God's authority and rule, an act of disobedience.

Another view of *mitzvah* is as the right way, the good and natural path for human beings to follow through life. "Sin, then," Steinsaltz says, "is conceived as a straying or deviation from this natural path." Such straying might either be the result of error, or a willful act of deviance from the good.

Finally, *mitzvah* can mean an “act of rectification or completion.” In this understanding, the world is broken and in need of repair, and *mitzvot* are those acts which contribute to completion and wholeness. Sin then becomes a “defect in reality,” a failure to act for repair or, even worse, an addition to the imperfection of reality (p. 883).

Steinsaltz’s insight into the nature of sin as a kind of mirror-image or negation of *mitzvah*, got me thinking about my own understanding of *mitzvah*, and how that might help me think about sin. *Mitzvah* is one of those concepts that’s a challenge to us Reconstructionists. Most literally, it means “command,” and indicates those things which God, or Jewish tradition in the name of God, commands Jews to do, both ritually and ethically. Since Reconstructionist Judaism rejects the notion of a commanding supernatural God, and no longer sees the Jewish community as wielding commanding authority over its members, this conception of *mitzvah* is not particularly compelling.

The popular notion of *mitzvah* as “good deed” is also lacking. Traditionally, *mitzvot* do include what you might call “good deeds”—like giving *tzedakah*, kindness to animals, visiting the sick. But that definition can’t account for another entire realm of *mitzvot* that includes practices like observing Shabbat, keeping kosher, lighting Hanukkah candles.

The definition of “*mitzvah*” that I have found to be the most useful comes from an Hasidic play on words, which derives the word “*mitzvah*” not from the Hebrew *l’tzavot*, “to command,” but from the Aramaic root *tzavta*, “to bind together, to connect.” **In this understanding, a *mitzvah* is that which connects us.** For the Hasidim, this meant connection to God, but I think we can widen this definition. A *mitzvah* has the power to connect us to many things. It might connect us to our past, to our ancestors; it might connect us to our family and our community; it might connect us to the earth, or to our own deepest values, or to others in need. And it may certainly serve to connect us to God, to the Source of life, to the divine in the universe. Whether we are lighting Shabbat candles or caring for the hungry and homeless, we are enacting connections of various sorts when we fulfill a *mitzvah*.

**So, then: if a *mitzvah* connects, can we say that sin is that which disconnects?**

There is much in Jewish thinking about sin that supports this approach. If we go back to the Biblical rituals of Yom Kippur, we see that the main concern about the defiling power of sin was that the sanctuary—the place where the holy ark of the covenant was kept and where God’s *kavod*, God’s presence, would become manifest—that this space would become polluted to the extent that God’s presence would have to withdraw. Here was disconnection at its most catastrophic, at least to those who kept and guarded the sanctuary (and presumably to the rest of the community as well). In the priestly understanding, human connection to God was predicated on the proper functioning of the sanctuary. And the sanctuary was the center of the community, it was the structure that allowed Godliness to function within the community. If the sanctuary became defiled and dysfunctional, then so, presumably, would the entire community—perhaps all of humanity, as well.

The ritual process of restoring the connection to God was called “*kapparah*,” the same root as “*kippur*,” and is usually translated as “atonement.” I was reading an article recently about the

history of the English word “atonement,” and discovered that its original meaning is literally what it looks like: “at-one-ment”—the act of coming into harmony with, being “at one” with. By the early 16<sup>th</sup> century, “at-one” was a transitive verb meaning “to achieve a state of at-oneness, or reconciliation, between two parties” (*The Forward*, “On Language,” 9/21/07). And it was William Tyndale, in his 1530 translation of the Hebrew Bible, who coined the English phrase, “day of at-one-ment,” to translate the Hebrew *Yom hakippurim* in the Torah. Where he could have used the English version of the Latin translation of the Hebrew word “*kippurim*”—the more common word “expiation”—he instead chose what was then a new word, “atonement.” In his translation, Tyndale affirmed that the response to the defiling power of sin is the restorative power of connection, the power of “at-one-ing.”

I have no idea if William Tyndale was familiar with midrash, but there is in the rabbinic sources some basis for his choice of words. In an early rabbinic commentary on the book of Leviticus, there is a discussion of the proper way for a person to confess his or her wrongs and ask for forgiveness on the eve of Yom Kippur. By way of illustration, Rabbi Isaac says: “It is like a person fitting together two boards, and joining them together” (Lev. R. 3:3). This image is striking, and a bit strange. What does the metaphor of a person joining two wooden boards together have to do with confessing the wrong we have done and asking God for forgiveness?

One way to interpret Rabbi Isaac’s statement is that it suggests a coming together of the person doing *teshuvah* with God—an “at-one-ment” of sinner and the Power that forgives. But perhaps the image is meant to go even further. Could the process of *teshuvah*, of acknowledging and seeking to turn from harmful deeds, bring a person close not only to God, but to others as well? Perhaps it’s an “at-one-ment” with the people whom have been hurt. Perhaps it’s a process in which the disparate parts of one’s own persona, one’s own soul, come back together. In this midrash, sin is implicitly understood to be that which disrupts relationship and severs connection, and thus the process of asking for, and receiving forgiveness, makes for connection, harmony, “at-one-ness.”

Mordecai Kaplan, the founder of Reconstructionist Judaism, in his discussion of Yom Kippur and the Jewish notion of sin, suggests that the thread that runs from the Bible to our own time is the idea that sin involves [quote] “a disturbance in the relation between humanity and God” (*The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion* (MOG), p. 165). If, according to Kaplan, God is understood as “that aspect of reality which confers meaning and value on life,” then “sinning” means the failure to be attuned to the Godliness which functions within and through us. The relationship we disrupt here is not between ourselves and some supernatural Being. It is rather a disruption of our relationship to a fundamental aspect of reality that we can call “divine”: the potential for good, for wholeness, that manifests both in individuals and within human society.

The notion of sin as a “disturbance of relationship” is an interesting one. On one level, we might understand sin as that which disrupts our relationship with our selves. What are the obstacles that keep me from fully knowing myself, from fully manifesting the Godliness that is inherent within me? What diminishes my integrity? As the medieval philosopher Maimonides notes in his Laws of Teshuvah, we transgress not only in obvious ways, through harmful actions against others, but also through *de’ot ra’ot*, negative thoughts or traits—like anger, jealousy, the greedy pursuit of wealth or honor, or addictive behaviors which harm ourselves.

We might think of sin as that which impinges on my capacity to act in a wholesome way in the world, and which keeps me at odds with myself. I sin when I become needlessly angry, not because I'm a "bad person," but because my anger keeps me far from the truth of the moment, keeps me far from others with whom I need to engage, keeps me far from my own good judgment. It disconnects me from the clarity and wisdom I need to make wise choices. And the effect of sin is further disconnection, a sense of alienation and un-wholeness, a fragmentation of self.

On the level of interpersonal relationship, it is also useful to think about sin as that which disrupts connection and relationship. What are the obstacles that I build or allow myself to fall into which keep me from coming into true relationship with others? Where have I harmed those relationships due to my own pride, or due to a diminished sense of self, which then leads me to diminish others? We can examine those qualities in our lives that get in the way of meaningful connection—perhaps a lack of gratitude, or impatience and anger, anxiety, laziness, envy, pride. These are all things we experience at one time or another, and the point is not to imagine that we can fully and entirely banish every negative trait from our lives and our inner beings. Rather, by focusing on this notion of sin as that which disconnects, we can explore those places in our lives and in our interactions with others where we experience that disconnection. Our *teshuvah* then becomes a positive act of repair, of cultivating wholesome qualities and traits that promote greater connection and "at-one-ness."

There is a powerful social aspect to sin that is also important to consider. This notion is expressed in a famous teaching from the Talmud:

"The Rabbis taught: every person must regard herself as though she were half guilty and half meritorious. If she performs one *mitzvah*, happy is she for weighing herself down on the scale of merit. If she commits one transgression, woe to her for weighing herself down on the scale of guilt...Rabbi Eleazar son of Rabbi Shimon said: Because the world is judged by its majority, and the individual is also judged by the majority of his deeds [good or bad], if he performs one good deed, happy is he for turning the scale both for himself and for the whole world on the side of merit. If he commits one transgression, woe to him for weighting himself and the whole world in the scale of guilt...On account of the single sin which this person commits, he and the whole world lose much good." (B.T. *Kiddushin* 40a)

In this metaphor of a delicate scale, we are encouraged to see each of our acts, for good or for bad, as having a potentially transformative effect, "weighing" us down for either positive or negative effect. But even more powerful is Rabbi Eleazar's teaching that each individual act for good or for evil has a potentially transformative effect not only on ourselves, but on the entire world. Mordecai Kaplan echoed this teaching when he argued that we should not make a distinction between sins against other human beings and sins against God. Because of the interrelated nature of all humanity, and with an understanding of the divine as a Power that manifests within and through human individuals and our social institutions, Kaplan teaches that [quote] "every sin is at the same time a sin against ourselves, a sin against our neighbors, and a sin against God" (*MOG*, p. 172).

In thinking about evil in the social realm, we can again understand sin as disconnection. How else can one person oppress another, hurt another, even kill another, without experiencing a profound sense of disconnection from the basic humanity of the other? The sins of violence and injustice are both a manifestation and a cause of deep, deep disconnection, the very opposite of “at-one-ment.” We need to both investigate our individual responsibility in relation to such sins, and to also ask, what are the social attitudes and social structures that allow and encourage this disconnection?

There is a human tendency to want to locate evil in something concrete, something embodied—usually another person or group of people. Rather than understanding the nature of the *yetzer ra*, the “evil urge,” as a capacity latent in every human being and group of human beings, including ourselves, this perspective reifies evil and tries to confine it to another—another religious community, political party, ethnic group, and the like. We see a person or group of people engaging in vile acts, and we then make the jump to conclude that this person, these people, are the embodiment of, are a container for, evil.

People—and I would include myself here—are drawn to this perspective because it is comforting on some level. If I can define evil in this way, if evil can be contained and embodied in a person or group of people, then it can, potentially, be eradicated—simply by destroying or neutralizing those within whom it resides. Like the High Priest of the Torah, we can kill the goat, or send it off into the wilderness, and consider ourselves both purified and safe.

This view, however, is not only naïve and misguided, it is dangerous and counterproductive. This view encourages and promotes disconnection, and thus only reinforces sin, rather than dealing with it effectively.

Sin, evil, whatever we want to call it, is the cause and the result of profound human disconnection, a human failure to take seriously the fundamental fact of our interconnection and our shared Godliness. There are some sins that frequent our front pages—suicide bombings, military attacks on civilians, ongoing genocide in Darfur. There are sins we hear very little about: for example, the fact that 45,000 people are dying every month in the Congo, a total of 5.4 million dead over the past decade, due to the civil conflict there. There is the sin of worldwide hunger, at a time when we have the ability to feed every human being on the planet. There is the sin of massive overconsumption in the West, and a striving for similar levels of consumption in the East, which is overtaking the earth’s capacity to sustain us. There is plenty of sin, plenty of evil, to go around, and I wouldn’t want to be the one to have to decide which group of people, which religion, which nation, which government institution, holds the greatest share of the blame.

Instead of apportioning blame, or trying to figure out which particular sins belong to me, and which belong to you, and which belong to “them” (whoever “they” are), perhaps instead we could make a commitment to understanding and overcoming the disconnection which ultimately leads to these catastrophic sins. This is not to let particular policies, or institutions, or groups of people, off the hook—it is, rather, to better understand the tendencies that lead to such profound disconnection that people who might otherwise be wise and good come to create the situations in which people suffer so profoundly. And then, from this place of understanding, we can begin to

craft solutions to the evil around us that would be lasting, effective, and just.

To really understand our place in the complex web of life on this planet would lead us to seriously re-evaluate our conduct. Every decision I make, on some level, affects not only myself, not only those in my immediate vicinity, but ripples out in circles I can't even see. As Rabbi Eleazar teaches, each act has some capacity, no matter how small or how large, to tip the scales towards the positive or towards the negative. To take interconnection and mutual responsibility seriously would have profound effects not only on our individual behavior, but on our society, on our public policies, on how we as a nation relate to the rest of the world.

While the responsibility in this is a bit awesome, it's also a perspective that is profoundly positive. What if I really believed that every action I take has the power to potentially nudge the world towards the good? This is enormously empowering. The entire Jewish understanding of the power of *teshuvah* is similarly empowering. For fundamentally, we are good, we are Godly, and every sin—every act of disconnection—has within it the seed, the possibility, of its own repair. As the great modern Orthodox thinker, Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik teaches: “[It] is a cornerstone of Judaism...that however great a [person's] transgressions may be, they fail to penetrate to the innermost core of his soul. Always, and under all circumstances, there is something pure, precious, and sacred in [the human] soul” (Pinchas Peli, *On Repentance*, p 184). So we should never despair of change, either for ourselves or for others.

Our tradition asks us to take extremely seriously our own capacity to sin, to cause disconnection, and to take just as seriously our capacity for repair, for reconnection, for “return.” May our own introspection on this day help us in the year to come to live a life that is more fully dedicated to the power of connection. May we learn how to come closer—to our own true selves, to one another, to those like us and unlike us, to that which is most precious and holy in the universe. And may we, in the words of our liturgy, be embraced by the Power of compassion as we do this work. May we “open up our inner nature to the Power of love,” may we be brought close to the Source of life in truth, with whole and peaceful heart. And may we each be sealed for a year of peace, abundance, and blessing.

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