

Yom Kippur  
Our Brit of Respect

I am a terrible test taker.

Always was.

The SATs... I took them two times, got the same score, and didn't show up for the third test I registered for. I took a songleading job instead of showing up that paid me \$300 for the whole weekend in Baltimore.

The GRE's were required for rabbinical school. I didn't even open up my scores when they came in the mail.

Some of my friends took those test preparation courses. I probably should have. One of those major test prep programs would discourage test takers from changing their answers.

Go with your first choice!

Maybe that was my problem.

But actually, Adam Grant, an organizational psychologist at The Wharton School and author of [\*Think Again: The Power of Knowing What You Don't Know\*](#), has written that psychologists have proven that most people who do change their answers, not all, but most, actually change their answers to the correct one... from wrong to right. It might not always work out that way, but there is a very interesting conclusion: "it's not so much changing your answer that improves your score as considering whether you should change it."

Grant writes:

We don't just hesitate to rethink our answers. We hesitate at the very idea of rethinking.... Part of the problem is cognitive laziness. Some psychologists point out that we're mental misers: we often prefer the ease of hanging on to old views over the difficulty of grappling with new ones. Yet there are also deeper forces behind our resistance to rethinking. **Questioning ourselves makes the world more unpredictable.** It requires us to admit that the facts may have changed, that what was once right may now be wrong. Reconsidering something we believe deeply can threaten our identities, making it feel as if we're losing a part of ourselves.

Rethinking isn't a struggle in every part of our lives. When it comes to our possessions, we update with fervor. We refresh our wardrobes when they go out of style and renovate our kitchens when they're no longer in vogue. When it comes to our knowledge and opinions, though, we tend to stick to our guns. Psychologists call this seizing and freezing. We favor the comfort of conviction over the discomfort of doubt, and we let our beliefs get brittle long before our bones. We laugh at people who still use Windows 95, yet we cling to opinions that we formed in 1995. **We listen to views that make us feel good, instead of ideas that make us think hard.**<sup>1</sup>

Growing up in the 70s and 80s, I learned... yes, it was learned, that some people were a threat. They were so different, so "alien," that I should see them as other. At the same time, we resented others who had the same perspectives about Jews.

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<sup>1</sup> 4

I remember being in high school, talking with a rabbinical student at the time, about a program we did in youth group called Judaism and Homosexuality. It was 1986 and after sharing my questions with her, she gave me a copy of a sermon from a rabbi at the gay/lesbian synagogue in San Francisco, [Congregation Sha'ar Zahav](#). He wrote a sermon on the Torah portion [Kedoshim](#), about holiness, that opened my eyes, gave me a new clarity, as he described the holiness he witnessed as the gay community showed love, care, holiness, and responsibility for one another by caring for one another during the peak of the AIDS pandemic. It forced me to rethink everything I was told, everything I heard, and everything I was trained to think up until that point.

*Al chet shechatanu l'fanecha, b'yodim u'v'lo yodim.*

*For the sin we have committed against you, for the harm we have caused in Your world consciously and unconsciously.*

It is time to take a breath and find the courage to rethink, retool, and respond to the biases we hold.

In the Book of Leviticus, we see that there are people who were experiencing a skin affliction called *tzara'at*. It is often translated as leprosy, but medical historians conclude that it is something else.

The text says

*V'ra'ah Hakohen et hanega...*

"The priest shall examine the affliction." ([Leviticus 13.3](#))

The ancient priests determined if this was *tzara'at* or not, and if the person needed to be isolated... or not. If the person was going to be separated from the community, it was the priest who would not only determine when and how, but would also work at bringing the person back to community, when it was safe.

I want to focus on the Hebrew for a second:

We often translate the line that the priest will "examine" the person, but the word is *Ra'ah* – "to see," from *Livot*. It isn't really "to examine."

*Nega* is a plague or infection—some kind of condition or disease. I think we can look at it as a wound.

The context is clear, the priest needs to examine this person with this *tzaraat*.

But I want to recalibrate how we see it.

Read it as: The priest shall see – really see – his wound.

The priest, the leader... will see where the other hurts.

It reminds me of the Chasidic teaching we often share...

The one about two friends chatting with one another. One asks the other, "Tell me what hurts me."

The second says, "How do I know what hurts you?"

The first responded immediately and said, "If you don't know what hurts me, how can you say that you love me?"<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Attributed to Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Ukraine

*V'ra'ah et Hakohen et a Nega*

We have to look and see where someone hurts.

And let's remember another teaching:

*V'atem t'hiyu-Li mamlachet kohanim v'goy kadosh.*

"You shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." ([Exodus 19.6](#))

We are to be a kingdom of priests, we are the ones who have to see the *nega*, the hurts of others in our community...and if we see them, if we hear them, if we know them, if we create that community of belonging, and we bring them back into community, that is what is going to make us a holy nation as God envisions.

Let's be the priest, the *kohen*, who helps the return of someone with a hurt.

Take this message of acting holy like a priest, seeing the hurts of others, and bridge it with Adam Grant's challenge to retool, rethink, relearn... then we see that as we gain a new clarity of how the world ought to be, we need to strive to bring the repair, the healing, the tikkun that is required.

"[O God,] You see our concealed shortcomings," reads the Psalms. We have to dig down and see our concealed shortcomings, too. Our biases, our unkind jokes, our messages and behaviors that perpetuate stigma, inequity, and hurt.

*Al chet shechatanu l'fanecha, b'kalut rosh*<sup>3</sup>

For the sin we have committed against you for making light of serious matters.

Eddie Ndopu has a degree from Oxford, is a South African activist, who works for the U.N. as an Advocate for the Sustainable Development Goals appointed by the Secretary-General of the United Nations. He is also dependent on a wheel chair since he lives with spinal muscular atrophy.

He teaches: "For all of its symbolic value as an institutional gesture of accommodation, the ramp does not make a space accessible. It facilitates entry into a building for people who use mobility devices to get around. What makes a space accessible is the empathy, connection, freedom and possibility it engenders for people of all abilities and identities to come together."<sup>4</sup>

These holy days are about doing our work. Making *teshuvah*, learning how to repent and repair hurts we have committed as we journey forward.

Institutions also have to do their *teshuvah* work. Some of you might have seen reports of the major institutions of Reform Judaism engaging trauma informed investigators and counsel to explore, consider, and recommend changes in our institutions ethics processes and codes after we have learned about how they have missed the mark. Just this week,

Rabbi Rick Jacobs wrote to synagogue leaders:

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<sup>3</sup> Kalut rosh = disrespect

<sup>4</sup> "It's Time to Rethink the Language of Accessibility. And to Imagine a More Equal World," *Time*, MAY 21, 2020. <https://time.com/5839846/rethink-the-language-accessibility-more-equal/>

On the Day of Atonement, our prayers cannot right the wrongs we may have inflicted on the people around us, though they can help us summon the resolve to walk the intensely demanding path of t'shuvah or repentance, which is our Jewish tradition's way to repair and heal relationships. There are several steps to t'shuvah, which is often a long, emotionally grueling process. First, we must acknowledge the wrongs we have done. Second, we must demonstrate true remorse and regret for our behavior. Third, we must take responsibility, seeking to repair harm that has been done and using learnings to ensure that the future is more equitable, inclusive, and respectful to all. Only then can we ask for forgiveness.

Jewish institutions too must do t'shuvah. It cannot be emphasized enough that the heart of our Reform Movement is our deep commitment to shaping a more just and compassionate world. That holy work must begin with each of us and the sacred communities we love and lead.<sup>5</sup>

Our congregation has taken steps in this same spirit. To review how we have led, to recognize the needs of our congregants, to listen to the individuals who are with us under our tent.

In our congregation, we have souls from various religious backgrounds, races, ethnicities, LGBTQ+ identities, gender identities and expressions, marital status, family structures, socioeconomic status, political affiliations, abilities, and ages.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Rabbi Rick Jacobs, "Jewish Institutions Must Also Do T'shuvah," *URJ Blog*, September 13, 2021. Rabbi Jacobs blog and video message can be found [here](#).

<sup>6</sup> Congregation Har HaShem's [Statement on Diversity and Inclusion](#).

All are entitled to find safety and a sense of homecoming in our Jewish community. But we can't guarantee that safety. We can't promise always to be a safe space. We have been talking a lot about changing our language from trying to create a safe space and instead, more honestly, trying to create a brave space.

One where instead of calling people out for doing wrong, we can call people in to try to be better. Where we can hold each other accountable. Where we can do our best to let those who feel vulnerable join us under the tent. And friends, there is going to come a day when we all will feel vulnerable, when we all will live with a special need, when we all will need the kind word and generosity of another.

I propose that we learn together how to create a brave space,<sup>7</sup> how to reconsider our speech, our words, and consider how they land on others. To recognize that we have people who have experienced traumas that you might not know about. To consider that not everyone can be embraced or touched. And to address and respond when someone abuses their power in this sacred community, whether it is the rabbi, a member of the board, a congregant or guest.

And for those who have concerns... this isn't about cancel culture or requiring politically correct speech. When we are in relationships with others, we appropriately have expectations of one another. As a community, we can grow and learn together. Please don't think of this as not being allowed to speak. It is about working to rethink our assumptions, considering the weight of our words and actions, engaging in humility –an attribute of great strength – and considering the humanity of another person.

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<sup>7</sup> A term I learned from Lisa Farber Miller of [Philanthropy Partners Consulting](#).

Shouldn't this be a community where we nurture *chesed* – kindness, *emet* – truth, and mutual responsibility.

[Our Safety Respect and Equity Task Force worked incredibly hard, for months, to create resources for us to learn...](#)and have created our own [Code of Ethics](#) for the congregation. Everyone who is a member of our congregation is going to be receiving this document. We will be able to review it, and **see how this covenantal statement is here to help us heal, grow, be courageous and brave, and to make our Tent one where we can be our best Selves.**

Dr. Ellen Umansky, the Carol and Dorothy Bennett Professor of Judaic Studies at Fairfield University in Connecticut, wrote an article called "Some are Guilty, All are Responsible" – a phrase penned by [Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel](#) -- as a contemporary response to the Yom Kippur confessions in Vidui. She wrote: "How often does apathy or indifference prevent us from speaking out against ideas or putting an end to behavior that we know to be wrong? We may not be guilty of harboring certain thoughts or voicing certain sentiments, but we are responsible for creating communities that encourage them. Similarly, tolerating unethical behavior makes us culpable. To paraphrase the Talmud, whoever can stop others within one's community from sinning, but does not, is held responsible for what those others do (Shabbat 54b)."<sup>8</sup>

For all these failures of judgment and will, God of forgiveness—

*Slach lanu, M'chal lanu, Kaper lanu*

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<sup>8</sup> Ellen M. Umansky, "Some are Guilty, All are Responsible," *Ashamnu and Al Chet -- We Have Sinned: Sin and Confession in Judaism*. 233.

Forgive us, pardon us, and lead us to atonement, lead us to brave space, lead us to retooling and relearning, to empathy, to being trauma informed, to a deep covenant with one another.