

Once, a man was traveling down a country road when he came upon a barn with many targets drawn on the side of it. Amazingly, right in the center of each target was an arrow. The man was impressed that there was a marksman who could shoot with such precision each and every time. He had to find this person and ask what the secret was. He knocked on the door of the house and when a man answered he asked him, "I see you are an excellent marksman, please tell me your secret." The man replied, "Oh, it is actually quite simple, first I shoot the arrow and then I draw the target around it."

Wouldn't it be nice if this is how life was? If we could act, and then set up the parameters of how our actions will be judged. Well, we know that this is not the way of the world. We are constantly trying to hit a bull's eye, but often we miss. Our intentions are good, but we may act in ways that don't get the response we imagined. Our ideals are pure but our human fallibility gets in the way.

This reality, this human condition is why we are here today. We are taking stock of the things we have tried to do well, but have missed hitting the mark.

Throughout the next 24 hours we are going to be reciting prayers that will use the Hebrew word "Chet". It is typically translated as "sin" but that translation doesn't do the word justice.

Chet comes from the Hebrew root meaning "missing a target". We know that all of us will miss the target sometimes in our lives. The real question is, "what do we do when that happens?"

Melissa and I are trying to instill this understanding of teshuvah in our children. We tell them that, part of being in relationship with others means that we accidentally (or even purposely) hurt them. But, we tell them, when they do, they must complete a three-pronged process of fixing it. First they must ask if the other person is ok. Second, they should make a specific apology. Third, they must ask if there is anything they can do to make the situation better.

This process models the steps for Teshuvah that Rambam, Maimonides, laid out in his 12th century text, the Mishneh Torah. He indicates that one must acknowledge they have done something wrong, right the wrong, ask for forgiveness and then, when placed in the same situation again, make a better decision and act differently.

The Meshach Chochma (a commentary on the Torah written around 1870 by Rabbi Meir Simcha of Dvinsk) states that failure to do teshuvah is **worse** than missing the mark in the first place. Missing the mark is a sign of being human, but not doing teshuvah and repairing the fractured relationship is a sign of hubris, an ultimate transgression.

And yet, if all we do during this season of Teshuvah is ask for forgiveness, even if we work to heal the damage our actions cause, we have stopped short of completing the process. The last step is to act differently when the same situation arises.

Judaism is a tradition of second chances. We recognize that we make mistakes and need the opportunity to do what is right the next time.

For Rambam, Maimonides, this is the last step of the Teshuvah process. Once we have acknowledged a transgression we make amends. But, we complete our Teshuvah when the same situation presents itself again and we hit a bull's-eye. It is in this moment that we fully redeem ourselves and complete our cycle of tshuvah.

I am blessed to have spent many years working with teens before I became a Rabbi. During that time, I saw several occasions when those in the leadership of a camp were faced with campers or staff members who were using drugs. Most of these programs have a zero tolerance policy. Once they know that someone has been using drugs, the camper is taken to their cabin and watched while they pack. They are then immediately sent home. They are not even given the time to say goodbye to their friends. I can understand the impulse to make a strong statement with such a policy but I am not sure it is the most effective way of helping the young people who transgressed the rules.

One summer, I saw a different response. When I was working at the Genesis program, which is a teen summer program at Brandeis University, several of the participants were caught smoking marijuana. The staff met individually with each of the participants involved and had some lengthy conversations with them about what they had done, what their participation in this act did to the group and what the ramifications would be. In addition, the participant and staff, together, spoke with the child's parents. In the end, of the six involved, only one was sent home. This participant didn't own up to his actions. He continued to lie to the staff and clearly didn't take seriously the gravity of the situation and his role in it.

The others admitted their wrongdoing, and, at the urging of the staff, apologized to the entire group. They also planned some programs for the group as part of their teshuva process. The students recognized that their actions had a significant impact on the rest of the group. They pressured other students to lie or cover for them. And they created a culture of an "in group" and "outsiders" which was not healthy. The programs they planned helped to rebuild the trust they had broken and brought the group together so there was no longer an in group and an out group. By remaining at camp they had to face the staff and their fellow campers, which they hurt. They had to live with the consequences of their actions. It is very clear to me that these students, when faced with a similar situation, will act differently. They clearly all learned from this experience and have shown much growth since then. One of those students is actually now the wife of a Rabbi and I would bet that, by example, she teaches the message of Teshuvah to people in her husband's congregation.

Instead of simply escorting the individuals off the premises, the staff of the Genesis program decided to enact our Jewish values and beliefs of Teshuvah and help them process their actions and the ramifications of them.

I am often asked if there is excommunication in Judaism. In some communities there was a system of separating someone from the community called *harem*. There is a reason that *harem*, banning someone from the community, is reserved for the gravest of actions. This teshuvah process doesn't happen with zero tolerance programs because, left on their own to sort through what happened, most kids, most of us, will not generally do the hard work teshuvah requires and certainly won't have the opportunity to help the community heal.

This gives us insight into what we are supposed to be doing at this time. Yes, we are supposed to be reflecting on the year that has passed. But, as the Meshech Hochma teaches, if that is all we do, we have failed. However, if we seriously do Teshuvah, we will make the adaptations needed to change our lives and the lives of those around us.

These changes don't have to be big. They just need to be goals that we set, actions we take and outcomes that we measure to know that we have changed from who we were before, to people who will act differently when placed in the same situation.

Frequently our lives are full of examples of people who have made mistakes and need to work to make positive changes in their lives and the lives of people they know.

Nick Cannon

In June, Nick Cannon, interviewed Richard "Professor Griff" Griffith on his podcast. Professor Griff made comments about the Black community being the true Israelites. He also asserted that Jews were the cause of "the majority of wickedness that goes on across the globe" .

Nick Cannon jumped on board with comments like, "we give so much power to the 'theys,' and 'theys' turn into illuminati, the Zionists, the Rothschilds."

He also stated that their comments couldn't be anti semetic. He commented that, "It's never hate speech. You can't be anti-Semitic when we are the Semitic people," he said. "When we are the same people who they want to be. That's our birthright. We are the true Hebrews."

After bad press and after ViacomCBS ended a decades-long relationship with Cannon, he began to apologize.

Cannon shared the following: "I extend my deepest and most sincere apologies to my Jewish sisters and brothers for the hurtful and divisive words that came out of my mouth,"

"I am committed to deeper connections, more profound learning and strengthening the bond between our two cultures today and every day going forward,"

Nick Cannon had some poignant one on one conversations which helped him better understand why his words were so hurtful to the Jewish community. A number of these were with individuals from the AJC, the American Jewish Committee and most notably

an interview with [Rabbi Noam E. Marans](#), the American Jewish Committee's director of *Interreligious and Intergroup Relations*.

Rabbi Marans has seen the work that Nick Cannon has done and recognizes it as transformative teshuvah.

We know it is not just the famous who need to make teshuvah. We are all guilty. In a different arena, changes need to be made in the discourse that is carried out in our society. More and more, we only engage with people who have the same opinions and viewpoints as we do. Susan Jacoby in her book *Age of American Unreason* asserts that we have gotten so polarized in our thinking that it is almost impossible for us to have respectful and productive conversations with people with whom we disagree.

For this, everyone should shoulder the blame. No matter where we are on the spectrum, right, left or center, Democrats and Republicans alike have contributed to this mess. People are only listening to people they agree with. There is a lack of understanding of how someone can believe a particular thing and during the debate they all end up dehumanizing the other. Language is used like: they're immoral, they're a monster or they are blind to the realities.

How do we turn this around? By all of us being able to see the good in the other. By taking time to appreciate the strength and depth of someone else's opinions even if it goes against what we think. Let's commit to having debates without becoming disagreeable. Let's, take an issue and see if we can argue for the other side, not to go against our own views but to give merit to the emotions and thoughts of our friends and neighbors.

We can take this time, as we celebrate Yom Kippur, to pledge that we will **not** knock down someone else's ideas just to boost our own, we will not minimize someone's commitment to a cause just because they don't approach it the same way we do.

I recognize how hard this is when the argument feels so personal and the other side feels so insulting. I am not saying there are "very fine people on both sides"? I am saying that we need to find ways for true dialogue on our differences. At the same time we want to be sure not to condone behavior or beliefs we find abhorrent? As an example, I can assert the position that abortion should be legal but at the same time recognize that it is the ending of a potential life and a tragedy. I can understand how others can be against it as they weigh their values in a different way. And, I would hope we could both come to the position to condemn violence stemming from the issue.

Maybe you are thinking this doesn't apply to you because you are always careful to consider both sides of an issue. however, as Abraham Joshua Heschel said when discussing racism in our country, "an honest estimation of the moral state of our society will disclose: Some are guilty, but all are responsible."

If anything has come out of the protests to support the Black community, it is that we can not just say we are not racist. We need to be anti-racist. We cannot be passive and allow for even minor slights against people of color let alone major infractions like the

police brutality and killings we have seen. We must reorient ourselves so we don't make decisions that (un)consciously uphold aspects of white supremacy, white-dominant culture, and unequal institutions.

We each need to see how we can actively help our country do teshuvah so that when it is in the same position again, it makes a better choice.

We are responsible even if not guilty but change is not easy. Recognizing what we can do is quite the task. We are set in our ways and don't see our role in maintaining the status quo.

A great story is told that recounts a radio conversation of a US naval ship with Canadian authorities off the coast of Newfoundland in October 1995.

CANADIANS: "Please divert your course 15 degrees to the south to avoid a collision"

AMERICANS: "Recommend YOU divert your course 15 degrees to the north to avoid a collision"

CANADIANS: "Negative. You will have to divert your course 15 degrees to the south to avoid a collision"

AMERICANS: "This is the captain of a US Navy ship. I say again, divert YOUR course"

CANADIANS: "No, I say again, you divert your course"

AMERICANS: "This is the Aircraft Carrier USS LINCOLN, the second largest ship in the United States Atlantic Fleet. We are accompanied with three Destroyers, three Cruisers and numerous support vessels. I DEMAND that you change your course 15 degrees north. I say again, that's one-five degrees north, or counter-measures will be undertaken to ensure the safety of this ship"

CANADIANS: "This is a LIGHTHOUSE. Your call"

While this story is certainly humorous, it also points to how hard it is for people to realize they need to change the course of their lives. We humans have an unlimited capacity to be stubborn. One of the blessings for us is that our tradition sets aside a time every year for us to look at our lives and actions critically. Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes once wrote that the mark of a civilized man is his willingness to re-examine his most cherished beliefs. Centuries before the Justice wrote these words, our tradition insisted that the mark of the ideal human being is not the examination simply of one's beliefs but rather the examination of one's actions. After all, shouldn't our behavior be the living out of our values? This is the time to look at our lives, to figure out what we can and need to do to change the direction in which we are heading. Consider this verse from the Book of Proverbs (28:13): He who covers up his faults will not succeed, but he who confesses and gives them up will find mercy.

Throughout our prayers, over the course of the next day, take time to reflect, not just on where you have missed the mark, but how you can make amends for these

actions and then, even if just for one or two, set a course of action as to how you can change your behavior the next time.

In the introduction to the vidui, the confessional prayers, we say, "Are we so obstinate as to think that we have not sinned?" Are we so sure of ourselves that we won't change our course? If we don't we better watch out, we could run into a lighthouse.

Gmar Chatima Tovah.