One of the words that's come up repeatedly in preparing for these services is *kavannah*. We typically translate this Hebrew word as "intention." You can understand the focus – the Days of Awe are our chance to do *cheshbon hanefesh*, an accounting of the soul, and set intentions for the future, making decisions that will impact how we live our lives.

The word *kavannah* also refers to a kabbalistic text, to be recited before a prayer. For the kabbalists, kavannot were essential for making sure that one was in the right headspace to make the prayers really count. These writings can be very beautiful – and, as you can imagine, they double the length of the prayer service.

Intention is important in prayer. If I were up here reciting the words of the liturgy, but thinking about baseball scores, you'd probably be able to tell.

The scholars of the rabbinic era also thought that intention was important. They established rules around when and how a person could pray. They also established

expectations of *kavannah* during the performance of a mitzvah.

Interestingly, though the Tanna'im (the rabbis of the Mishnaic period) suggest that it is essential for one to have intention while fulfilling the mitzvah of hearing the shofar on Rosh Hashanah, the Amora'im (the rabbis of the Talmudic period, a few hundred years later) are in a *machloket* – a disagreement – between Rava and Rav Zeira about whether or not intention is required by the shofar blower. After all, it's not technically a mitzvah – a commandment – and even if a shofar blower is distracted, all that matters is that they're playing correctly. This means that if you were skipping services and happened to walk past a synagogue during the shofar service, if you stopped to listen to the blasts, you have fulfilled the mitzvah (this is not an endorsement of skipping services. On the other hand, if you are absentmindedly walking around blowing the shofar blasts – as long as you do them correctly, Rava would argue that your blasts are just as

valid as one who stayed up all night practicing, studying, and meditating before blowing shofar.[1]

The rabbis also draw a distinction around kavannah when it comes to *aveirot* – sins, or misdeeds. They discuss three different categories of *aveirot* which impact the punishment for one who transgresses the law. The first category is *B'meizid*. This refers to a person who knowingly and intentionally transgressed, and garners the strictest punishment. The second category, *B'shogeg*, refers to one who broke the law accidentally – that is, they knew that the action was illegal, but unintentionally committed the crime.[2] The third category is *Tinok sheNishba* – literally, the baby that is abducted. This category refers to a Jewish person with no knowledge of the law (which they could only imagine if a Jewish baby were abducted and raised by non-Jews) – one who is ignorant of the law and its consequences.[3]

[1] This is a very long discussion in the Talmud, beginning here. Here are Rava and Zeira's arguments.
[2] Here's one example.
[3] The discussion begins here with the Mishnah, but the relevant reference to this category is found here.

While ignorance tempers the consequences of the misdeed, it does not let the transgressor off scot free. Neither does causing harm by accident.

A story: I was nineteen years old, home from college for winter break. I had gone to a high school friend's house for a small New Year's Party. There were roughly 20 people there, about half of whom were close friends, and half acquaintances. One of those acquaintances, then in their senior year of high school, came up to me. "Hi! I hated you for like two years." "I'm sorry?" "When I auditioned for the play you were directing, you told me that I needed to take an acting class. But I'm OK now – I found other things to get involved in, and I'm feeling really good about my life." I was at a loss for words. It's true that this person had auditioned for a part in a play that I co-directed in my junior year of high school. And it's true that I was not able to cast them (over twenty people had auditioned for six parts). After we posted the cast list, this person had asked me for advice in getting cast in plays at the high school. I encouraged them to take a class with the acting teacher, who was also the director of the non-musical shows, as I

had found from experience that it was easier to get cast when the director has a fuller sense of your abilities than what they get from a 2-minute audition.

I was shaken. Someone hated me. And on top of that, someone hated me based on a misunderstanding.

At moments like these, it's really tempting to react defensively. I didn't say that! It's not my fault that you misunderstood my words!

I didn't respond. It was clear that this person had needed to have their dramatic tell-off moment. It seemed that it had been cathartic for them. They returned to their friends and I caught up with my friends. But clearly, this incident has stuck with me.

Another story: six years later. I was working as a case manager at a social service agency, serving primarily people living below the poverty line. In addition to seeing clients individually, I was the regular staff person for our kosher anti-hunger program, run in the style of a restaurant. One of my case management clients, who I'll call Michael, was a man in his early 70s, a regular attendee

of the meal program. One day, he came into my office for our scheduled appointment looking perturbed. He reported that during the night, his building superintendent had announced through the loudspeaker that Michael was a criminal. I pressed him further on this, as I couldn't imagine that his Single Room Occupancy low income apartment building had a loudspeaker system that broadcast into all apartments. He told me that he had heard it himself. He added that while he was at the grocery store, another client of the program, Stella, had come in and started screaming that he was a criminal. As he told me the story, there was terror in his eyes. After my meeting with Michael, I immediately went next door, to my supervisor, Sara's office. "I think that Michael is having hallucinations. Let's keep an eye on him tonight."

Sure enough, that night at dinner, Michael reported that Stella had, during the meal, gotten up and started screaming that he, Michael, was a criminal. Sara and I sat with him to check in, as we could now verify that he was hearing things that were not happening. We calmly explained to Michael that we had both been in the room at

the time of the alleged incident, and had not heard anybody screaming. We made a plan for him to come back so that the three of us could make a call to his doctor to make a plan for next steps. In that moment, I was extraordinarily grateful for the advice that Sara had given me that afternoon: speak to Michael gently and sympathetically. Remember that whether or not this disturbing thing actually happened, Michael had experienced it. It was real for him.

This is impact. People can be severely impacted by something that didn't even happen. The important thing is that they are feeling the real hurt of the experience that they are having. Whether or not we can see it. Whether or not we're aware of it.

Another story: when I was in college, I studied in Berlin for a month – a May Term on Multiculturalism in Berlin. Of a dozen students, all but one were white. Dante was the only student of color in the program. One day, we had a conversation which got heated. The previous evening, we had attended a class at Humboldt University about white

privilege and microaggressions. Two of the white students felt that it was inappropriate to “make white people feel guilty” for being white. Dante shared that he had had experiences of Germans staring at him aggressively. The two students responded that we might be making negative assumptions about Germans based on the history, and that perhaps people were just curious. Maybe they had heard him speaking English.

We had to wrap up the conversation early, as we were meeting a tour guide who was taking us on a walking tour of Kreuzberg, the most diverse neighborhood in Berlin. She asked where we were all staying. When Dante named his neighborhood, the tour guide responded: “be careful – there’s lots of neo-Nazi activity around there.” The two white students made no acknowledgement of hearing these words. Then we headed to the U-Bahn station – the underground subway station.

We stood, the students, professors and tour guide – fifteen people in all – speaking English while we waited for the train to arrive. As we waited, another one of the white

students and I took in the situation. We watched as multiple German commuters walked past the large group of people speaking English, clearly American – and stopped to stare, separately, at the two black people in the group – our professor and Dante. It happened at least five times. The other students didn't notice a single instance.

They couldn't let themselves see the racism that Dante had described. Because acknowledging that something was going on that they hadn't picked up on would have made them feel culpable. It's easier to continue to be ignorant. Because once you're aware that something is going on – something that you can have an impact in changing – continuing to live your life just as before is complacency.

One of the hardest things for many white people to acknowledge is their own racist beliefs. I'm not talking virulent, violent, loudly expressed beliefs. We're talking about the beliefs that we have unconsciously learned from our society. Our society, which goes beyond a country's borders, is built on years of oppression – against black

people specifically and non-white people generally, against women, against queer people, against Jews.

Having been raised within a racist, sexist, homophobic, antisemitic society, there is no way that we could have emerged without absorbing racist, sexist, homophobic, and antisemitic beliefs. These are deeply internalized, such that we aren't always aware when they are impacting our actions. But no one is immune from these beliefs. In spite of being the partner of a person of color, I have internalized racist beliefs. Denying it would require avoiding doing any internal reflection. But I can't let myself off the hook by saying, "I don't see color," or, "I don't have a racist bone in my body."

Painful as it is, it's important to acknowledge these things. Jay Smooth, a radio DJ and cultural commentator I've respected for many years, gave a great TED Talk a few years ago about how to talk about race and racism. There are many excellent resources on this topic that I'm happy to share, but this is among the most concise explanations around. I'd like to share a few excerpts from his talk.

We deal with race and prejudice with this all or nothing, good person/bad person binary in which either you are racist or you are not racist. As if everyone is either batting a thousand or striking out every at bat. And this puts us in a situation where we're striving to meet an impossible standard. It means any suggestion that you've made a mistake, any suggestion that you've been less than perfect, is a suggestion that you're a bad person.

So we become averse to any suggestion that we should consider our thoughts and actions, and this makes it harder for us to work on our imperfections. When you believe that you must be perfect in order to be good, it makes you averse to recognizing your own inevitable imperfections and that lets them stagnate and grow…

We need to shift…toward thinking of being a good person the same way we think of being a clean person. Being a clean person is something that you maintain and work on every day. We don't assume that I'm a clean person therefore I don't need to brush my teeth.

And when someone suggests to us that we've got something stuck in our teeth, we don't say "Wh-what do you mean? I have something stuck in my teeth? I'm a clean person! Why would you--" [Audience laughter]

… if we could shift a little bit closer, toward viewing these race conversations the same way we view a conversation about something stuck in our teeth, it would go a long way toward making our conversations a bit smoother and allow us to work together on bigger issues around race.

…I hope that bit by bit, if we consider that and are mindful of it, we can shift away from taking it as an indictment of our goodness and move towards taking it as a gesture of respect and an act of kindness when someone tells us that we've got something racist stuck in our teeth.[4]

[4] Excerpted from Jay Smooth's TEDxHampshire College talk, "How I Stopped Worrying and Learned to Love Discussing Race." Video and transcript available on Jay Smooth's blog.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel said, "In a free society, all are involved in what some are doing. Some are guilty, all are responsible."[5] Even if we did not intend to engage in harmful behavior, we have a responsibility to do *cheshbon hanefesh* and reflect on the ways that we've benefitted from harmful behavior.

Many of our actions have unintended consequences. It's about what we do when we become aware of the impact of our actions. Do we educate ourselves by take a tour of a historically black neighborhood (this Saturday – talk to Heather Ciociola for more details)? Do we stop buying Nestle, Hershey, or Mars because they can't verify that their chocolate was produced without child labor?[6] Do we stop buying Chick-fil-A because of their partnerships with anti-gay groups?[7] Do we get serious about carrying canvas bags to the grocery store? Do we stop using plastic straws?

[5] This line appears in various forms in many of his writings. One version is found in his 1972 essay, "The Reasons for My Involvement in the Peace Movement," included in Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity, ed. Susannah Heschel, p. 225. Noonday Press, 1996. Another is quoted in the New York Times' obituary of Heschel, December 24, 1972.

[6] Read more here.

[7] Here's an overview of Chick-Fil-A's policies and alliances.

These are all good starts for those who have the ability to make these changes, but our individual actions have a much smaller impact than our collective actions. Corporate waste has a far greater impact on our environment than plastic straws[8], but lobbying your elected officials to pass laws to protect the environment is a more nebulous, less satisfactory activity than buying a metal straw. It's much easier to take a concrete, easily accomplished step to feel like we're making a difference, thus establishing the goodness of our character.

But education and advocacy have to accompany action in order to accomplish change on a measurable scale.

When we become aware that we are part of the problem, regardless of our individual actions – what do we do? Do we get defensive? Do we deny? Or do we take it as an invitation to grow?

One final story: it was the day after Yom Kippur, last year. Cantor Kate asked me to meet for coffee. Although she felt awkward about saying it, she let me know that she had

[8] As seen here, with nearly half of all plastic production coming from four companies.

been disappointed that I didn't check in with her more during services. She was still in the first months of a medical crisis, and had no answers as to why her body was responding. I responded by unconditionally apologizing. I could see that although I had taken steps to help Kate have an easier time – getting a stool up here so she could rest during the service, taking on more parts of the service, giving her opportunities to go lie down in my office – I had been so anxious about doing a good job in my first High Holy Day services here that I had assumed that creating those resources for her was enough. When it was her turn to lead prayers, I took the opportunity to close my eyes and breathe, relieved that CKS had such an amazingly talented prayer leader who I could rely on to do some of the heavy lifting (a lot of the heavy lifting, if we're being honest). I wasn't asking how she was doing, or giving positive feedback after a particularly strenuous piece of liturgy.

Kate was honestly surprised that I took in her comments without getting defensive. Her feedback actually helped me to grow in this role, get more comfortable working as part of a team, and helped Kate and I develop a

relationship as not just colleagues, but friends. My ability to receive that feedback was essential to strengthening this developing relationship.

I'm not telling this story to make myself look good. On the contrary, I hope that this story shows that even with good intentions, we can hurt people without any intention of doing so, without actively doing anything wrong. But I do hope that this story is a reminder that while a pointed critique could be an attack, it's more likely to be a reminder that, as Jay Smooth tells us, occasionally, we get a little something in our teeth.