

## Yom Kippur 5778

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*Prepared in partnership with Rabbi Shaanan Gelman*

It was at a Shabbaton for recovering alcoholics run by an organization called JACS<sup>1</sup>. After an uplifting Shabbos together, all the participants gathered together for Havdalah. At Shabbatonim, Havdalah rituals are not uncommon- they are a great way to bond and strengthen the inspiration of the last 24 hours. The Havdalah ritual at a JACS Shabbaton, however, is a little different. It is less like an NCSY ebbing ceremony, and more like an AA meeting. Before they sang soulful zemirot bidding farewell to the Shabbos queen, everyone was encouraged to share who they are, why they are there, and, in the tradition of Alcoholics Anonymous, how long they had been sober. And so each participant said something like, “Hi, my name is Debbie, and I’m a recovering alcoholic. I’ve been sober for five years.” This went on for several minutes, and then someone got up to speak: “Hi. My name is David, and I’m a recovering alcoholic.” He looked down at his watch and continued, “And I’ve been sober for 84 minutes.”

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<sup>1</sup> Told to me by Rabbi Yosie Levine, Senior Rabbi of the Jewish Center in New York City.

Can you imagine? On this very Shabbaton, dedicated to combating alcohol abuse and supporting those who are fighting it, this man fell off the wagon! While that is shocking, it is empowering to know that although only several hours had passed since his last drink, he had the courage to declare that he was on the path to recovery once again, even though it would likely take him years to achieve the level of sobriety of his compatriots, and he would always be in recovery. Today is the day we seek atonement from God, and we know there are no magic bullets. The path to recovery is long and arduous; it involves the daily shofar during Elul, losing sleep over Selichot each morning (or, hopefully, at least some guilt for not doing so), it involves marathon Rosh Hashanah davenings and Shabbos Shuvah. We have been on our path of spiritual recovery for quite some time. And like that courageous man at the JACS Shabbaton, *anyone* who wants can jump on board and begin his journey no matter how late his arrival. As in any process of self-repair, the longer we work the program, the better our odds. Yet, the Medrash on the book of Shmuel as paraphrased by Rashi tells us that no matter how hard we work, there are three classes of people who jump to the head of the repentance line, no matter what they have done previously and how recent it was. Who are these people?

**רש"י בראשית פרק לו פסוק ג**

ולהלן קורא לה (כח ט) מחלת. מצינו באגדת מדרש ספר שמואל (פרק יז) שלשה מוחלין  
להן עונותיהם גר שנתגייר, והעולה לגדולה, והנושא אשה, ולמד הטעם מכאן, לכך נקראת  
מחלת שנמחלו עונותיה:

One who converts, someone who gets married, one who is elevated to a  
leadership position:

What is it about these people which grants them a free pass while the rest of us  
have to slowly and methodically plod our way to achieving atonement? Each  
one of these is an example of someone who has embarked upon a brand new  
path in life. Our sages describe a convert as כקטן שנולד דמי, like a newborn, an apt  
description for the recently installed leader and the newlywed as well. Whatever  
any of these people did before, whatever was in their past, is no longer  
predictive of their future. The new CEO may have started out in the mail room,  
the newlywed used to be known as a serial dater and legendary party animal,  
and the convert may have been a devout member of another faith. All of that is  
entirely irrelevant as a new life unfolds before them. Instantaneous *mechilah* is a  
sign that these people are not the same people as they were before, and if we  
wish to gain *mechilah* ourselves, it would behoove us to understand their  
metamorphosis, and to emulate their example.

Getting married is an opportunity to set up a new home, and with that comes not only new furniture, place settings and kitchenware, but a chance to establish a new behavior pattern. Consider the newlywed, and the first Shabbos after sheva brachos are over. The couple is eager to usher in the Shabbos queen at their new matrimonial table; they prepare special recipes in advance, bring out their new place settings and prepare. Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could recreate that feeling, when Shabbos is exciting, when we look forward to getting home from work and greeted our spouse with true joy, and a Shabbos meal isn't something we eat perfunctorily before crashing on the couch? You don't need to be newly married, or married at all, to experience renewal of this sort. We can all rededicate our houses by creating new rituals and modifying our conduct, especially when it comes to Shabbos. Maybe it is as simple as setting up the candles on Thursday night, or turning on Jewish music while preparing for Shabbos. What if carpool or running errands on Erev Shabbos was done to the soundtrack of Yossele Rosenblatt, Ben Zion Shenker, Shalsheles or the Maccabeats? Shaya and I have a ritual every Erev Shabbos on the way to school- we blast Chassidishe Shabbos music from a set of CDs called *Lechaim Tish* in the car. Shaya looks forward to hearing *Lechaim Tish* every Friday- indeed, that's one of the ways he knows it's Friday! Years ago, a friend of mine worked at a home for men with special needs in Borough Park. There was a resident in the home by the name of Jacob who loved Shabbos. He would get showered, shaved and

dressed hours in advance of the holy day, and then he would park himself onto the living room couch as if waiting anxiously for a long lost friend. Suddenly, the sirens blared in the streets of Brooklyn, heralding the arrival of Shabbos. And Jacob would become animated, jumping out of his seat, clapping his hands together frantically as if he had just been informed of winning the lottery. He would repeat the words “oh boy, oh boy, Shabbos is here”, while wearing a wide and almost sinister grin. How amazing would it be if we could greet the Shabbos like that each week? As time passes and familiarity sets in, we lose the magic. We take people for granted, we treat them as props or servants rather than as human beings, we treat events that happen every week as happenstance. A young man studying in a Kollel in Israel was suffering because his wife’s standards of cleanliness did not meet his, and the discrepancy between his fastidious nature and her lackadaisical one was proving to be a festering source of resentment for him. The young man didn’t know what to do; he was afraid to speak to his wife about it, yet it was eating him up inside, so he went to Bnei Brak to consult the saintly Steipler Gaon, R’ Yaakov Yisroel Kanievsky of blessed memory. People would come to the Steipler all day, from all walks of life, from all over the world, to seek his advice and get his blessing. The Steipler was almost completely deaf, the result of repeated blows to his head sustained when he was a soldier in the Red Army, delivered by anti Semitic officers when he refused to compromise on his religious principles. So when visitors would come to 15 Rechov Rashbam in Bnei Brak, they would write the matter about

which they came on a piece of paper. An austere man of few words, he would sit in his study, constantly looking into some *sefer* or other, and when people would hand him their notes, he would read it, and either start praying or respond. His responses, in keeping with his character, were often condensed into several short, yet powerful sentences. This young man came before the Steipler, and handed him the note that described the bedlam that ruled his house every Friday. The kitchen had oil splatters everywhere, the sink was stacked way past the faucet with dirty dishes, the children were running wild and undisciplined and, of course, were filthy...the Steipler read the note, looked up briefly, and made a grave face. He asked the young man, in his thick Russian Yiddish: *Dee vilst takkeh vissin vos tzee teen?* Do you really want to know what to do? The young man nodded, looking happy that the Steipler grasped the severity of the situation. Staring straight back at him with his penetrating eyes, the Steipler yelled- *NEM A BEYZIM!! Take a broom!* The Steipler taught this fellow that it was in his hands to change the tone of his house, his marriage and actually, his entire life. Being a newlywed is not about being newly married; it's about changing your behavior, and is sometimes as simple as taking hold of a broom.

The Medrash also tells us that a newly minted leader also receives instant *mechilah*. What is the primary characteristic of the *oleh legedulah*? We are not talking about the CEO who has been sitting in his corner office, with a high backed leather swivel chair, for years. No, we are talking about the mindset of

the new leader in the first few moments of his or her new job. That person knows something they pray no one else will realize: That they don't deserve this promotion and are not even prepared to take on the daunting list of responsibilities. Dare I say there is even a sense of shame as they pass the nameplate on the door of their roomy new office. But time passes, and they become accustomed to the trappings of power, the honors bestowed upon them, the groveling and flattery. And every time that coffee cup is delivered at 9 AM sharp onto her desk without even asking for it, the thought flits into her mind, perhaps subconsciously: *ess kumt mich- magia li*. The *Oleh legedulah* is too unseasoned to believe his own publicity, and it's that knowledge- that humility- which allows him to become the perfect recipient for forgiveness. It's true when it comes to human relations as well. Think about those whom you are more likely to forgive; I bet they are more likely to admit their own flaws and deficiencies. The very fact that they are aware of their foibles makes it easier to forgive them when we are their victims. That is the emotion we wish to capture today. "Who am I, God, to deserve the forgiveness you will bestow upon me?" Today, we are all *oleh legedulah*- we all receive promotions and we will all be forgiven. As we step into the office, we do so with great hesitation.

Finally, the convert, the newborn. Everything is exciting, new and untainted by cynicism and apathy. The first time they encounter a Jewish text, they are filled with questions that require answers immediately. The first time they bring a

piece of warm challah to their lips, they feel like they are tasting heaven itself. The first time they attend a Pesach Seder, or a Rosh Hashanah davening- they aren't asking "what time did you finish?" They live their spiritual lives according to the prescription of the author Anne Lamott in her amazing book, *"Help, Thanks, Wow! Three Essential Prayers"*

*"Gorgeous, amazing things come into our lives when we are paying attention: mangoes, grandnieces, Bach, ponds. This happens more often when we have as little expectation as possible. If you say, "Well, that's pretty much what I thought I'd see," you are in trouble. At that point you have to ask yourself why you are even here. [...] Astonishing material and revelation appear in our lives all the time. Let it be. Unto us, so much is given. We just have to be open for business."*

Rav Simcha Zissel Ziv, the Alter of Kelm comments<sup>2</sup> that of all of the sins which we enumerate during the vidui section of the Yom Kippur service, it is the final one that is most severe, almost as if all the others are leading up to this one: על חטא שחטאנו לפניך בתמהון לבב. How do we translate this cryptic phrase? What is *timhon levav*? It means the lack of feeling in the heart. Lifeless, dispassionate, apathetic so-called Judaism, when a person is not a *margish*, a feeling person. [*Yizkor: Do you want to know what a margish is? Think about the people for whom we are about to say Yizkor. They felt yiddishkeit in their kishkehs. Maybe they weren't Jewishly learned, but they knew what yiras shomayim, what fear of heaven, was. Maybe they never opened up a Shulchan Aruch*

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<sup>2</sup> אור רש"ז, רמ"ג

*Yoreh Deah, but they knew how to kasher a chicken and broil a liver. Maybe they were guilty of every one of the al cheits, but timhon levav they weren't guilty of...yet]* tragically, it describes so many of us. When we are not a “margish,” it affects everything we do- this is the ultimate *al cheit*, the final blow to our chest that must leave a lasting impression. Perhaps Jews by birth will never know the wonder which engulfs and inspires those who are choosing Judaism as they immerse in the Mikvah, but all of us, no matter our background, can access that sentiment today. What if we saw ourselves and our Judaism as a choice and even if, for many, it could easily be viewed as an accident of birth? What if we saw it through the eyes of those who wholeheartedly chose it on their own? To achieve *mechilah*, the goal of the day, we simply have to channel our inner newlywed, rookie leader or recent convert.

It was almost 10 years ago on the last day of an annual Israel mission of the Manhattan Jewish Experience, a Modern Orthodox outreach organization led by my dear friend Rabbi Mark Wildes. On the itinerary for this day was a visit to Hadassah Hospital to spend time with a victim of a terror attack. His name was Keith; he was originally from Bayonne, New Jersey and he made aliyah at the age of twenty. As an *oleh chadash* and *chayal boded*, a soldier with no family, he went right into the army. Keith's base was attacked by a group of Palestinian terrorists who dressed up as Israeli soldiers, murdering four Israelis and wounded a number of others, including Keith. One of the

participants in the mission raised his hand and asked: "Keith, if before you made aliyah and joined the army you knew that you would have been shot, would you have still decided to come to Israel?" Without flinching, Keith answered "Yes. I'd do it all over again if I had to". And then another person got up from the audience, someone who was not part of the tour but had wandered into the group. He stood up and said, "You know, I just realized that the day I converted to Judaism was the day you were injured in that attack. I know this because the Rabbi performing the conversion asked me if I really wanted to convert to Judaism, since the Jewish people are still a persecuted people. Just today, he said, there was an attack on an Israeli base and four Jewish soldiers were killed and a number of other soldiers were injured. *Are you sure you really want to become Jewish?* I now realize it is you the Rabbi was talking about!"

Keith then turned back and asked: "Well...what did you answer the rabbi?" The gentleman responded: "I answered yes, and said that I hope one day maybe I'll be worthy".

Keith turned back to the convert and said: "Welcome to our people".

Indeed, what it means to be a member of our people is that we are always growing, and never worthy, ever marveling at the awesome privilege which has been conferred upon us. The great Mashgiach of the pre-war Mir Yeshiva, Rav Yerucham Levovitz, compared forgiveness on Yom Kippur to a bargain basement sale with onerous strings attached. *Mechila* is granted to

all, regardless of credit and effort. But once you sign on the dotted line, you commit yourself to a balloon payment that comes due the moment the final shofar is sounded, a blast that signifies relief in the hearts of too many, when it should be triggering a sense of responsibility. That we will gain atonement today is a guarantee. That we will *earn it*- that's up to us. May the day come, soon, when we are worthy.

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