

Imperfect Masterpieces

A customer sent an order to a distributor for a large amount of goods with a very forceful demand for a rush delivery. The distributor noticed that the customer hadn't paid his previous bills and already owed a great deal of money. So he called the customer and said, "We received your order for a rush deliver on your new order but we can't ship the goods until you pay for the last one." The customer was annoyed and said, "What do you mean you can't ship me the order before I pay my past bills. I can't wait that long!"

Ah, the time for paying the bill. We've all experienced that moment of awkwardness when, after a fine dining experience with friends and loved ones, the bill arrives. Who reaches to picks it up? How will the others respond to pay their share? This one had a couple of drinks, the most expensive entrée and dessert while that one's meal cost far less. How to split it? What's polite? What's fair? Examining the bill more closely could resolve all the questions, but we often shy away from breaking the numbers down so exactly out of fear that such close scrutiny will put a damper on the rest of the evening. But putting off the accounting has its consequences as well.

Rosh HaShanah begins both the New Year and the *Yamim Noraim*, the Days of Awe. It is a time for *Cheshbon HaNefesh*, literally, “the account of the soul.” It is a process of stocktaking and introspection. The theological and spiritual concept of *Cheshbon HaNefesh* is linked to the realization that all of our actions and inactions, all the words we said or failed to say, have consequences. What we did or failed to do has had an impact on others: our loved ones, our friends, our partners, our acquaintances, and even the strangers we meet by chance encounter. *Cheshbon HaNefesh* presents us with a candid evaluation and we very well may not be comfortable with what it says. For better or worse, it is a moment of truth, a reckoning of facts and realities of who we are.

During this time of the year, nearly every Jew finds his or her way into a synagogue. Not all are familiar with the liturgy. Many have a hard time following the ancient Hebrew passages. Not all are moved by the sentiments expressed from the *bimah*. But nearly all long for those moments of accounting. Today it is the sound of the shofar that startles us and alerts us to this accounting of our soul. Today, and then on Yom Kippur, we contemplate, we review and we examine again our personal reality and mortality.

Each of us asks, “What have I done with my life? How do I treat those I claim to love? Who am I? What happened to me? What happened to those dreams and aspirations I once held dear?” This process of self-examination is a necessary step towards honest repentance and forgiveness. It is the breaking down of excuses and defensiveness and the beginning of the confessional *Al chet shechatanu l’fanekha*, “*For the sin that we have committed against You.*” Delivered with a pounding of the chest, we admit our flaws, our failures; we admit how very often we have fallen short of the person we had hoped to be.

Yes, that is one way of looking at *Cheshbon HaNefesh*, the accounting of our soul. But here’s another way: Unlike the bill from the restaurant or the IRS, *Cheshbon HaNefesh* is negotiable! To paraphrase Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, a rock is a rock. That is its empirical reality. It’s a rock! But humans live both in the here and now as well as in the projection of what can be. Our capacity for spirituality elevates us beyond the simple empirical to a consciousness that enables us to be aware of our life’s meaning and purpose. We can be aware of our being, even beyond our mortal days. Which is to say that we are creative and dynamic. We are also works in progress.

Accordingly, our *Cheshbon HaNefesh*, the accounting, the taking stock of who we are, is not a static process. Nor should it ever be a negative exercise of self-condemnation.

Some years ago, Professor Phil Miller, the head librarian of the Klau Library at HUC-JIR in New York, taught about the origin and significance of the Yiddish expression *a gut'n kvittel*. This expression is often used during the High Holy Days through Sukkot. As he wrote: "It was common practice in Eastern Europe that book-keepers did not make erasures in their ledgers; if an error was made or was found in review, the practice was to take a small slip of paper and to paste it over the error and to write the correct entry on it. Often only a portion of the paper was pasted so that someone else could examine the error underneath to see if it was truly an error. This little piece of paper that was pasted on the error was called a *kvit* or *kvittel*." By the way, a message placed in the Kotel, the Western Wall in Jerusalem, is traditionally called a *kvittel*. As Dr. Miller taught, this quaint tradition expressed the concept that, depending on our actions, our "ledger entry," the bill we owe, could be adjusted by our acts of *teshuvah*, *t'fillah* and *tzedakah*, acts of repentance, prayer and charity. Therefore, that time-honored Yiddish greeting, *gut'n kvittel*, reaffirms the fact that it is never too late to make amends. From the moment we choose, we can change for the

better. Our fate is not sealed. Rather, WE are in control of our actions. No one should ever think that he or she is without redeeming qualities. And we should never ever let anyone else tear us down and rob us of a sense of self-worth. Judaism's greatest teaching is that each person should know that he/she is created *b'tzelem Elohim*, in the image of the Divine. Each life is precious. And no matter how hard and unfair the experiences have been so far, each life is holy.

Sam Anderson recently wrote a fascinating piece in the New York Times Magazine about a well-known statue. A little more than 550 years ago, a sculptor was chosen to carve a monumental statue of King David. The plan was for the statue to sit prominently, high on the Duomo, the great cathedral of Florence. It would serve as testimony to the strength and glory of the city. The sculptor selected an enormous block of marble cut from a quarry in Carrara. The block of marble was some 18 feet tall and weighted approximately 25,000 pounds. Unfortunately, the sculptor and those in charge of the quarry were not up to the task. In addition, no one since the fall of Rome had attempted a marble statue of such magnitude. There were errors in the cutting. There were errors in the schlepping of the block of marble down the mountain. It even fell down a steep embankment at one point. The trip from Carrara to Florence is only 80 miles, but it took the

porters two years to transport it. And there were errors in the marble itself. The block they chose was riddled with flaws: marred by little holes and discoloration. When the block finally arrived in Florence there was an outpouring of admiration and awe. The townspeople nicknamed it “The Giant.” But when experts examined it, they were dismayed. They noticed every flaw, every crack, and every discoloration and declared the marble block a fiasco. Even still, the sculptor went to work. His initial efforts followed practices that were common at the time. He roughed out his vision by hacking away what he believed was unwanted stone. But these early efforts proved disastrous. He carved a usual hole in the middle of the marble block and seemed unsure how to proceed. By now, the city leaders, the project funders and even the general public were outraged. Their investment, they feared, was lost. The sculptor was fired and The Giant sat unceremoniously in Cathedral’s courtyard for 35 years, abandoned, a flawed failure, an embarrassment to the city.

A decade later, Michelangelo Buonarroti was born. In his mid-twenties, Michelangelo had earned rave reviews for his Pieta in Rome’s St. Peter’s Cathedral. So a new generation of leaders in Florence called on Michelangelo to see what he could do with The Giant. Experts and critics howled that it was another waste of time and money. Marble is best carved

when it is freshly cut from the mountains. Exposure to the elements causes it to be brittle and difficult to finesse. And though this young man did a fine job with his Pieta, no one alive had attempted a statue of this size. It was a futile effort of redemption. It was a hopeless and even a foolish cause. So what did Michelangelo do? He started with the *cheshbon*, the evaluation. What were the possibilities? What are the limits? Where are the strengths? In what way can the weaknesses be supported and the hidden potential be revealed? He built a shed around The Giant, to give him privacy to work without being mocked by the so-called experts. He worked the flaws. He brought out the strengths of marble. And as Victor Coonin describes it in his history of the statue "From Marble To Flesh," it was "like a person being slowly revealed as water drains from a bath." When the shed was removed in 1503, the townspeople of Florence, and soon people all over the world, were amazed. Michelangelo's David is still considered one of humanity's greatest artistic achievements. He took a seriously flawed block of marble that had been abandoned and ridiculed and transformed it into a masterpiece. He used the odd dimensions and the quirks and cracks of the rock and utilized them to realize a youthful, vulnerable David who, nevertheless, exuded strength, power and courage.

The true purpose of the *Yamim Noraim*, these Days of Awe, is not to pound our chests in shame and self-flagellation. Our goal is not to harp on our short-comings and failures. We are not here to tear ourselves down. Rather, we are here to renew, rebuild, and reaffirm that each and every one of our lives has inestimable meaning and purpose. Our *Cheshbon HaNefesh*, the accounting of our souls, the self-examination of the state of our lives, is a life affirming, positive and sacred act. Yes, it requires an honest and candid evaluation and review, and that is by no means easy. In addition to our self-doubts, there's all too often that frenemy who takes such delight in reminding us of our floundering, awkward, and embarrassing moments. But we don't need the snide and cruel remarks of frenemies to remind us of our shortcomings. We know our imperfections. They reflect back on us in the mirror and cause restless nights of regret. We confront them when we consider the successes and graces of those who we judge are more successful. We know our failures; we feel them when we remember the great aspirations, the great expectations, the dreams and goals that we held and cherished and hoped for and fought for, only to slowly let go of. Those lost hopes haunt us still. But there is no shame in failure. Rather, we learn from failure. As Winston Churchill said, "Success is stumbling from failure to failure with no loss of enthusiasm."

Indeed, at the core of Judaism, is an enthusiasm for life. It is the conviction that we do have the power to transform our lives for the better. We can grow and learn. Therefore, let not these *Yamim Noraim*, these Days of Awe, be but a droning litany of wrongs and woes. Rather, this is also a time to recognize the goodness within each and every life. So it is that at the conclusion of Yom Kippur we'll recite just such a reminder of the goodness that resides within, the goodness we have shown and the goodness we have shared:

We loved. And we wept. We were kind---and spoke thoughtfully.

We were faithful and trusting. We put forth effort.

We were mindful. We embraced. We took delight in holy books.

We were creative. And we yearned.

We fought for justice---and searched out the good.

We tried our best. And we were attentive.

We have joined hands to build community.

We have nourished and supported.

We have opened ourselves to hope.

We have pursued the good

We have quieted our anger.

And we have remembered those who came before us. (*Mishkan HaNefesh* p. 659)

My friends, we have come together at the beginning of this New Year 5777 with both humility as well as with transcendent blessings. We are imperfect masterpieces: mortal and vulnerable, flawed with certain weakness, falling short again and again from our highest, noblest aspirations. But we are created with purpose and sacred meaning. This is not the time for anguish. This is Rosh HaShanah. Our *Cheshbon HaNefesh* is to examine and review the failures and the disappointments not for reasons of chastisements. Rather, like Michelangelo, examining that discarded block of marble, we look within ourselves with new eyes and we search with renewed hope to find that masterpiece that is waiting to be revealed.