

Three Types of Sins

Yom Kippur is the one time of year Jews talk about sin. Soon, we will return to our Kol Nidrei service at the point called *Vidui*, our “Confession of Sin.”

The language of sin does not roll as easily from the Jewish tongue as it does for Christians. Christians are born into a state of sin. The distinction between God and humanity is the presence of some degree of defilement that is an inherent consequence of our biology. The inextricability of sexuality from procreation brings the whole enterprise into question.

While Jews don’t believe in original sin, our sacred literature introduces the idea that evil and sin are still inherent to our humanity. We aren’t born in a state of sin, but we do have within us an inclination toward chaos and greed alongside our inclination toward order and peace. Our task is to control the inclination toward chaos and greed with the inclination toward order and peace.

Think about Freud’s concept of the id, superego and ego. The id is the inclination toward chaos and greed; the superego is the inclination toward order and peace; the ego sorts out desires and values and makes choices.

We Jews like to think of our sins as mistakes.

In fact, the Hebrew word we most often use to refer to sin is *chet*. But *chet* is just the first of three categories of sin.

A *chet* is an arrow. When we refer to sin as *chet*, as in the prayer we will recite together shortly, *Al chet shechatanu lifanecha*, we imagine an archer’s arrows that have missed their target. A *chet* is when we fail to meet our own expectations or the expectations of others whom we love and want to please. Sometimes we fail ourselves and each other knowingly, sometimes unknowingly.

A *chet* is easy to make up. We recognize the failing. We apologize and compensate for pain and suffering. We change our behavior the next time the situation arises.

The second category of sin in Jewish thought is *Avon* in Hebrew. *Avon* comes from a root meaning to be twisted, to be crooked. This category of sin is not a mistake, a failed effort, but a fundamentally compromised point of view, a queer perversity of temperament which propels one in the direction of wrongdoing.

Confronting the *avon* in our lives requires a cognitive approach to reshaping the foundational beliefs and assumptions that result in self-deprecating and destructive behaviors. Education, therapy, meditation, and medication are often helpful tools for straightening out the way we think.

Once our thoughts are repaired, we may still make mistakes. But we can learn from them and grow.

Our third and final category of sin in Jewish thought is *Pesha*, which means rebellion. It refers to an attitude of total narcissism and selfishness. A flat out denial of external standards of right and wrong and a complete lack of personal accountability towards others results in *pesha*. The ego of a person enmeshed in a state of *pesha* has to be obliterated, and a new sense of self in relationship to the rest of the universe must be cultivated. Only then can the methods for correcting *avon*, twisted logic and thinking, be applied. And only then can the individual begin learning from mistakes and correcting behavior accordingly.

There is a relationship among the three categories of sin in Jewish thought. One can lead to the next...in either direction.

A failure to recognize mistakes as such, over time, might lead to twisted logic and left unchallenged false perceptions can lead to self-aggrandizement.

Vice versa. A shattered ego can present one with an opportunity to recognize his or her twisted logic. In turn, the effort to straighten out unhealthy thoughts and beliefs can lead the individual to see successes and failures as the result of practiced behaviors.

The rabbis are not kidding in the Talmud when they teach that as one *mitzvah* can lead to another, so can one *avera*, one sin, lead to another.

Rabbi Michael Strassfeld teaches that *sin is not original; nor is it a powerful dark force of the universe. What we call sin, or better yet, what we see as the flaws of our personalities, is part of the structure of the universe. Sins are the fault lines where subterranean aspects of our souls, our personalities, bump up against each other and come into conflict.*

We are bound to lose our sense of perspective and sense of self at different times in our lives. We make mistakes. We think too much or too little of ourselves, and others.

Take a look at the world we live in today:
Drought and fires.
Gun violence.
The widening gap between rich and poor.
Refugees.
Religious fundamentalism.
Racism and xenophobia.

Likutim Yekarim, an 18th century Chasidic work, asks the question, if there are sparks of holiness in all things, as the mystics teach, then what are the sparks of holiness in sin?

Seriously, how do we look at our own shortcomings, our own twisted logic, our own arrogance, and then the problems of the world and not become depressed? Sin and evil are everywhere. What's the point?

The Chasidic work answers its question. The sparks of holiness in sin are the opportunities for *teshuvah*: repentance, return, realignment, recalibration, reconciliation.

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Fred Rogers, of Mr. Rogers PBS fame, is often quoted regarding a lesson he learned from his grandmother. His grandmother taught him that during moments of crisis and tragedy one can get caught up in blame and commentary about the presenting problem or one can look more closely and notice all the helpers and join them.

The sparks of holiness in sin are the opportunities for *teshuvah*. Our task is to look closely and find them. The journey, the willingness to learn and grow, is the goal. We can't learn and grow without becoming aware of our mistakes. We can't change unhealthy thinking without noticing there are other options. We can't shrink our egos if we fail to witness the value and worth of others with whom we share life and busy-ness.

You could say that our purpose is not simply to avoid sin nor is it to overwhelm ourselves with blame and guilt for our mistakes. Rather our purpose is to seek sparks of holiness, new windows through which we see the world, new doors through which we may either enter or exit as appropriate.

Teshuvah is not the remedy for some externally diagnosed spiritual illness. Teshuvah is the goal, the purpose, the whole point, the spark of holiness in sin, error, and evil.

Some people like to say that life is the journey and not the destination.

I think *teshuvah* is the journey.

It's not enough to live through the personal challenges we encounter. It's not enough to feel indignant in response to current events new injustices in the world.

Our task is to go after the sparks of holiness. Our task is to find the helpers and emulate their work.

Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav makes the case this way:

You have to judge every person generously. Even if you have reason to think that the person is completely wicked, it's your job to look hard and seek out some bit of goodness, someplace in that person where he is not evil... By looking for that little bit, the place however small where there is no sin (and every one, after all has such a place)... you allow teshuvah to take its course...now go do it for yourself as well! You know what I have taught you: Take great care: be happy always! Stay far, far away from sadness and depression.

Teshuvah: repentance, return, realignment, recalibration, reconciliation is a healthy state of being.

Seizing opportunities for growth, for self-improvement, for *tikkun olam* – for bettering the world in which we live, is our purpose. When we engage in learning new habits, when we look at the world through different lenses, when we actively seek sparks of holiness and opportunity amidst chaos and disappointment – our lives become more orderly and more satisfying.

Teshuvah, growth, learning from our mistakes and the mistakes of others, finding the helpers and joining them... Teshuvah is not merely a high holy day remedy, but our purpose.

