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What Makes Us Great?

We think the great things we do in life make us great. We think we're good people because of all the amazing things we've accomplished or succeeded in. While this might be true by western culture, this is not how God attributes greatness.

Let's look at some truly great people and where they started from.

Yitro was a pagan priest – he was worshiping all the different idols of his time – including some pretty debased ones. When we think of the definition of holiness – closeness to God, Yitro was pretty far from it.

And yet, the very Torah portion when God gives the Jewish people the Torah – the purpose for all of creation -is named after Yitro! Why couldn't that Parsha been named more aptly, "Matan Torah - the giving of the Torah" or at least "Moses" who actually climbed Mt. Sinai to receive it?

However, God names one of the most important events in all of the history of the world 'Yitro'. And Moses, the greatest prophet of all time, married Yitro's daughter. Isn't this interesting? Weren't there nice Jewish girls from nice Jewish families that Moses could have married?

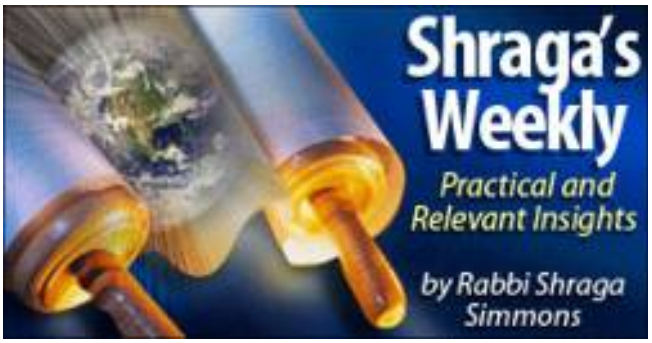
Let's look at another example with Moses' successor, Joshua. Joshua sent two spies, Calev and Pinchas to scout out the land of Israel before conquering it. To hide themselves, they went to a woman of ill repute's house named Rachav. Rachav was famous throughout the land for what she did. When she saw that these two Jewish men were going to conquer the land, she said that she would help them escape if they would save her and her family. They agreed and she helped them escape and they subsequently saved her and her family. Later on, she ends up converting and marries the greatest leader of the generation – Joshua. Again, weren't there nice Jewish girls from nice Jewish backgrounds Joshua could have married? He had to marry a woman who came from such a low and debased past?

Herein lies the beauty of *Teshuvah*, repentance. God allows us to be co-creators in our own reality. We get to choose based on our own actions how great we get to become. But ironically, it's not based on what we think our strengths are.

The things that we think are *keeping us* from greatness – whether it be a situation, character trait, relationship, etc, are actually the *key* to our greatness. Oftentimes we think we'd be so much better, so much greater if not for 'this thing, this person, this part of myself, etc.'. However, that thing that you think keeps you low, is actually the key to propel you to unparalleled heights.

Yitro could have stayed a famous pagan priest and relegated his future based on his past. However, both Yitro and Rachav, used the thing that kept them low and turned it around which propelled them to be leaders of the Jewish people!

With God's help, if we're able to identify those things in our lives which we think keep us small, and instead of ignoring or blaming, but rather use that very thing as a form of fixing, then we can become greater than we could have ever imagined, just like Yitro and Rachav.



Exploring the Al-Chet prayer

When one begins to look at the task of *teshuva* (repentance), it can be overwhelming. We've made so many mistakes this past year that it's hard to know where to begin! Clearly, if we don't have an excellent system for tackling this project, it will be very time consuming and draining.

In Judaism we say that if you can get to the root of the problem, you can eliminate it entirely. That is the goal of the "Al Chet" prayer that we say so many times during Yom Kippur services. The 44 statements comprising "Al Chet" are not a list of mistakes, but rather identify the roots of mistakes.

We'll examine the "Al Chet" prayer, one statement at a time. But remember: "Change" is a process that doesn't happen immediately. Don't try to conquer too many things at once; it may be too overwhelming. Instead, choose the areas that cut closest to the root of your problems. This will maximize your success in the *teshuva* process.

1. For the mistakes we committed before You under duress and willingly.

How can we be held accountable for mistakes committed under duress?! The answer is that sometimes, we get into compromising situations because we are not careful. Many of these "accidents" can be avoided by setting limitations to avoid temptation.

Ask yourself:

- Duress:
    - Did I put myself into compromising situations, and then when I got into trouble rationalize by saying it was "unavoidable" or "accidental?"
    - Have I tried making "fences" so that I won't transgress?

    - Have I considered setting up a penalty system as a deterrent against certain mistakes?
    - When I legitimately got into an unavoidable situation, did I stop to consider why God might want me to experience this particular challenge?
- Willingly:
    - Did I make mistakes because I was lazy, or because my lower, animalistic urges were getting the better of me?

2. For the mistakes we committed before You through having a hard heart.

Hardening of the heart means that I closed myself off to deep, human emotions like compassion and caring. The newspapers and streets seem so filled with one tragic story after another, that I can become desensitized to the whole idea of human suffering.

Ask yourself:

- Did I ignore the poor and the weak?
- When I did give charity, was it done enthusiastically or begrudgingly?
- Was I kind, compassionate and loving when my family and friends needed me to be?
- Do I feel the pain of Jews who are assimilating, and of how that impacts the Jewish nation as a whole?

3. For the mistakes we committed before You without thinking (or without knowledge).

Every day, a Jew prays to God for the ability to think and reason. A clear mind is integral to our growth and development. If we're riding in a car and staring aimlessly out the window, then for those precious moments we are nothing more than zombies.

Ask yourself:

- Do I carefully examine my society and surroundings, weighing out what is right and what is wrong?
- Do I constantly review my major goals in life?
- Do I strive for a constant awareness of the presence of God?
- Is one of my goals in life to be a "thinking" individual?

4. For the mistakes we committed before You through things we blurted out with our lips.

A wise man once said, "You don't have to say everything you think." The Talmud says that when we speak, our lips and teeth should act as "gates," controlling whatever flows out.

Ask yourself:

- Do I think before I speak?
- Am I prone to thoughtless outbursts?
- Do I make hasty promises that I am unlikely to fulfill?

5. For the mistake we committed before You in public and in private.

Ask yourself:

- Public:
    - Did I do foolish or degrading things to attract attention or approval?
    - On the other hand, did I do good deeds in public, that I otherwise wouldn't have done - simply so that others would see me?
- Private:
    - Did I act privately in a way that I would be ashamed if anyone found out?
    - Did I consider how God is watching even in my most private moments?
    - Did I convince myself that because nobody sees me, the mistakes somehow don't count?

6. For the mistakes we committed before You through immorality.

When the Torah speaks of immorality, it usually refers to sexual immorality. Since sex is the strongest human drive (next to survival itself), it can therefore be used to achieve the greatest degree of holiness, or - as we so often witness - the greatest degree of debasement.

Ask yourself:

- Did I speak or act in a way that lowered sexuality as a vehicle for spiritual connection?
- Do I realize how sexual immorality reduces the spiritual potential of future, more holy unions?

7. For the mistakes we committed before You through harsh speech.

Speech is the unique human faculty, and is the way we build bridges between each other - and through prayer, with God. That's why abuse of speech is considered one of the gravest mistakes possible.

Ask yourself:

- Did I speak to anyone in a harsh and forceful manner?
- Did I gossip?
- Did I engage in idle chatter that wasted my time and that of others?
- Did I seek opportunities to elevate others with an encouraging word?

8. For the mistakes we committed before You with knowledge and deceit.

As we know, knowledge is a powerful tool - and a dangerous weapon when misused.

Ask yourself:

- Did I use knowledge of a certain situation to deceive others?
- Did I use knowledge to deceive myself - i.e. did I rationalize away my bad actions?
- Did I use knowledge to circumvent the spirit of the law?
- Did I use knowledge to show off and impress others?

9. For the mistakes we committed before You through inner thoughts.

The Talmud says that "Bad thoughts are (in one way) even worse than bad deeds." This is because from a spiritual perspective, "thoughts" represent

a higher dimension of human activity. ("Thoughts" are rooted in the spiritual world; "deeds" are rooted in the physical world.)

Ask yourself:

- Did I think in a negative way about people, or wish bad upon them?
- Did I fantasize about doing bad deeds?

10. For the mistakes we committed before You through wronging a friend.

"Friendship" is one of the highest forms of human activity. When we reach out and connect with others, we experience the unity of God's universe, and bring the world closer to perfection.

Ask yourself:

- Did I strive to go out of my way to help friends, based on my commitment to be their friend?
- Was I insensitive toward my friends' needs, or did I hurt their feelings?
- Did I take advantage of someone who trusted me as a friend?
- Have I made a conscious effort to learn how to be a better friend?

11. For the mistakes we committed before You through insincere confession.

On Yom Kippur when we say each line of the "Al Chet" prayer, we gently strike our heart - as if to say that it was "passion and desire" that led to these mistakes. Do we really mean it?

Ask yourself:

- Did I ever apologize without being sincere?
- Have I committed myself to "change" without seriously following up?

12. For the mistakes we committed before You while gathering to do negative things.

Engaging in evil as a lone individual is bad enough. But just as the secular courts treat "conspiracy" more seriously, so too God despises the institutionalizing of bad habits.

Ask yourself:

- Am I part of a regular group that discusses negative things?
- Did I participate in a gathering that led to negative activities?
- Am I careful to associate only with moral and ethical people?

13. For the mistakes we committed before You willfully and unintentionally.

- Willfully:
    - Did I ever "act out" in a desire to demonstrate my independence from God?
- Unintentionally:
    - Did I make mistakes out of carelessness? Could they have been avoided?

14. For the mistakes we committed before You by degrading parents and teachers.

Parents and teachers are our first authority figures in life, and by way of association they teach us how to be respectful toward God and His mitzvot. The breakdown of respect for parents and teachers corrodes the moral core of society.

Ask yourself:

- Parents:
    - Do I sometimes think poorly of my parents?
    - Do I ever actually communicate a dislike toward them?
    - Do I make the effort to appreciate how much my parents have done for me?
    - If I were a parent, what would I want from my children? Am I giving that now to my parents?
    - Do I give special attention to the needs of the elderly?
- Teachers:
    - Have I maximized opportunities to learn from rabbis and teachers?
    - Have I actively sought the guidance and counsel of wise people?

15. For the mistakes we committed before You by exercising power.

God apportions to everyone exactly what they need: whether wealth, intelligence, good fortune, etc. Only when we feel our position is independent of God do we seek to dominate others for our own advantage.

Ask yourself:

- Did I take advantage of those who are weak - either physically, economically or politically?
- Did I manipulate or intimidate someone into doing something he'd really rather not have?

16. For the mistakes we committed before You through desecrating God's name.

As a "Light Unto the Nations," every Jew is a messenger of God in this world, responsible to project a positive image.

Ask yourself:

- Did I ever act in a way that brought less honor and respect to God?
- Did I ever act in way that gave a bad impression about what it means to be a Jew?
- Did I take every opportunity to enlighten others about the beauty of Torah?

17. For the mistakes we committed before You with foolish speech.

People have a habit of talking for talking's sake. When we're bored, we may get on the phone, and "talk and talk and talk." Don't talk without a purpose. In any conversation ask yourself: "Is there any point to this conversation? Am I learning anything? Am I growing?" If you can't identify the point, there probably is none.

Ask yourself:

- Did I waste time by talking about trivial things?
- Do I seek to share words of Torah at every opportunity?

18. For the mistakes we committed before You with vulgar speech.

Did you ever find yourself in the middle of a distasteful joke? It can be insidious, but all of a sudden you find yourself dragged into a discussion that has taken a turn for the worse.

Learn to switch tracks. Monitor your conversations, and when you notice them slipping off track, pull them back, gently and subtly.

Ask yourself:

- Did I contaminate my mouth with vulgar speech?
- Did I listen to vulgar speech or jokes?
- Did I protest when I heard vulgar speech?
- Do I always express myself in the most pleasant way possible?

19. For the mistakes we committed before You with the Yetzer Hara (evil inclination).

The Yetzer Hara is that little voice inside each of us that tries to convince us to pursue physical comfort, at the expense of greater spiritual pleasures.

Ask yourself:

- Have I pursued my physical drives for their own sake - without involving any spiritual dimension?
- Do I resort to the excuse that "I couldn't help myself"?
- Have I studied Torah techniques for channeling physical drives into holiness?

20. For the mistakes we committed before You against those who know, and those that do not know.

Ask yourself:

- Have I wronged people behind their backs?
- Have I wronged people to their faces?

21. For the mistakes we committed before You through bribery.

Bribery is most subversive because we are often not aware of how it affects our decisions. In the words of the Torah, bribery is "blinding."

Ask yourself:

- Have I compromised my honesty and integrity because of money?
- Have I compromised myself for the sake of honor and flattery?
- Have I failed to do the right thing because I wanted approval?

22. For the mistakes we committed before You through denial and false promises.

The mark of a great person is a meticulous commitment to truth - despite whatever hardships, embarrassment, or financial loss might be involved.

Ask yourself:

- Have I lied to myself?
- Have I lied to others?
- Does my job ever involve having to lie?
- Have I rationalized the acceptability of a "white lie?"

23. For the mistakes we committed before You through negative speech (Loshon Hara).

It is said that big people talk about ideas, medium people talk about places and things, and little people talk about people. Gossip causes quarrel and division amongst people - and tears apart relationships, families, and even entire communities. As King Solomon said: "Life and

death are in the hands of the tongue" (Proverbs 18:21).

Ask yourself:

- Do I enjoy gossip?
- When I hear gossip, do I accept it as true, or do I reserve judgment?
- Have I set aside time to study Jewish law on how to avoid Loshon Hara?

24. For the mistakes we committed before You through being scornful (or scoffing).

Ask yourself:

- Did I mock and ridicule serious things?
- Did I make fun of someone who I considered less intelligent or attractive?
- Did I shrug off constructive criticism as meaningless?

25. For the mistakes we committed before You in business.

Integrity is the mark of every great person. The Talmud says that the first question a person is asked upon arriving in heaven is: "Did you deal honestly in business?"

Ask yourself:

- Have I been scrupulously honest in all my financial transactions?
- Was I harsh in trying to beat the competition, or did I seek ways for us both to thrive?
- Have I chosen a career that gives me freedom to pursue my personal and spiritual goals as well?
- When I was successful in business, did I show my appreciation to God for that success?

26. For the mistakes we committed before You with food and drink.

Eating is such an essential human activity, that the rabbis say all of a person's character traits are revealed at the dinner table.

Ask yourself:

- Did I eat in order to gain energy to do mitzvot, or did I eat for the sake of the animalistic act alone?
- What secondary activity did I do while eating? Did I read the paper and watch TV? Or did I engage in meaningful conversation?
- Have I made every effort to eat kosher food?
- Did I express gratitude to God for providing me with the food?
- Did I overeat?
- Did I eat unhealthy foods?
- Did I waste food?

27. For the mistakes we committed before You through interest and extortion.

Gaining financial advantage because someone else is destitute shows poor character. That is why the Torah forbids loaning money to another Jew on interest.

Ask yourself:

- Have I made a profit as a result of someone else's misfortune or downfall?
- Am I greedy?

- Am I stingy?
- Do I feel responsible for helping to satisfy the needs of others?
- Do I appreciate the Torah prohibition against charging interest - and have I studied these laws?

28. For the mistakes we committed before You by being arrogant.

The trait the Torah uses to describe Moses is "the most humble man." Humility is a key to spiritual growth, because it allows us to make room in our life for other people - and for God.

Ask yourself:

- Have I made others feel lowly in order to raise myself higher?
- Do I dress and speak in a way that draws extra attention to myself?
- When walking through a door, do I usually go first, or let others go first?

29. For the mistakes we committed before You with eye movements.

Sometimes we can harm others without even saying a word. For instance, the Talmud discusses the illegality of staring into someone else's home or yard.

Ask yourself:

- Did I look at someone else's private things that were not my business?
- Did I gawk at an accident scene on the freeway?
- Did I look at the opposite gender in an inappropriate and disrespectful way?
- Did I signal my disdain for another person by rolling my eyes?

30. For the mistakes we committed before You with endless babbling.

Often we feel uncomfortable with silence, so we fill the time with meaningless chatter. The Torah tells us, however, that more than anywhere, God is found in the sound of silence.

Ask yourself:

- Do I participate in conversations with no meaningful content?
- Do I think before speaking and measure my words carefully?
- Am I careful to concentrate when reciting prayers and blessings?

31. For the mistakes we committed before You with haughty eyes.

The Talmud says that a person's eyes are the "window to the soul." An arrogant person is therefore referred to as having "haughty eyes."

Ask yourself:

- Do I communicate warmth and care to people with my eyes?
- Have I avoided interacting with certain people because I felt they were too unimportant for me?
- Have my career and relationships suffered because my ego is over-inflated?

32. For the mistakes we committed before You with a strong forehead (brazenness).

The Talmud says there are three traits which characterize Jews: kindness, compassion, and

shame. "Shameful" means feeling embarrassed and remorseful when doing something wrong.

Ask yourself:

- Do I examine the moral consequences before making difficult decisions?
- Do I appreciate how my moral behavior defines me as a human being?
- Have I studied what Judaism says about conscience and morality?

33. For the mistakes we committed before You in throwing off the yoke (i.e. refusing to accept responsibility).

Judaism defines greatness as having a greater degree of responsibility. Deep down this is what every human being wants - hence the excitement over a promotion or raising a family.

Ask yourself:

- Have I accepted family responsibilities, and gladly assisted whenever needed?
- Do I keep my commitments to friends?
- Do I show up on time?
- Would my colleagues describe me as "reliable and dependable?"
- Have I taken responsibility for the problems in my community?
- Have I accepted my unique responsibilities in this world as a Jew?

34. For the mistakes we committed before You in judgment.

The Torah tells us it is a mitzvah to be *dan li-kaf zechus* - to judge people favorably. This means, for example, that when someone shows up an hour late, rather than assume they were irresponsible, I should rather try to get all the facts, and in the meantime, imagine that perhaps they were delayed by uncontrollable circumstances.

Ask yourself:

- Am I in the habit of judging people favorably?
- Do I wait to make any determination until I have all the information?
- Do I sometimes judge God unfairly?

35. For the mistakes we committed before You in entrapping a friend.

Ask yourself:

- Have I violated the trust of people who have confidence in me?
- Have I divulged confidential information?
- Have I taken advantage of family and friends by manipulating them into doing me favors?

36. For the mistakes we committed before You through jealousy (lit: "a begrudging eye").

Someone who has a "good eye" will sincerely celebrate the success of others, while someone with an "evil eye" will begrudge the success of others.

Ask yourself:

- Do I experience resentment at the success of others? Or do I experience genuine joy?
- Do I feel that others are undeserving of their success?
- Do I secretly wish to have my neighbor's things for myself?

37. For the mistakes we committed before You through light-headedness.

Sometimes we can forget that life is serious. We're born, and we die. What have we made of our lives? Have we been focused on meaningful goals, or are we steeped in trivial pursuits?

Ask yourself:

- Do I spend time reading unimportant sections of the newspaper, or listening to frivolity on the radio?
- Do I spend time with friends and colleagues discussing inconsequential details of sports and entertainment?
- Do I act with proper reverence when I'm in a synagogue or learning Torah?
- Do I speak about Biblical personalities and our Jewish Sages with the proper respect?

38. For the mistakes we committed before You by being stiff-necked.

In the Torah, God refers to the Jewish people as "stiff-necked." This is a positive attribute in the sense that we are not easily swayed by fad and fashion. Yet on the negative side, we can also be unreasonably stubborn.

Ask yourself:

- When I'm involved in a disagreement, am I frequently anxious and upset, rather than calm and rational?
- Do I think that I'm always right? Do I usually let the other person speak first, or do I always want to speak first?
- Do I listen attentively to the other side?
- Have I been single-minded and lost my objectivity just because I really wanted something?

39. For the mistakes we committed before You by running to do evil.

Ask yourself:

- When I transgressed the Torah, did I do so eagerly?
- Did I run to do mitzvot with the same enthusiasm?
- Did I slow down when reciting blessings and prayers?
- After completing a certain obligation, do I run out as fast as possible?

40. For the mistakes we committed before You by telling people what others said about them.

Ask yourself:

- Have I encouraged contention, and turned people against each other?
- Did I reveal secrets?
- Have I studied the Jewish laws prohibiting such speech?

41. For the mistakes we committed before You through vain oath taking.

One of the Ten Commandments is "not to take God's Name in vain." Integral to our relationship with God is the degree to which we show Him proper respect.

Ask yourself:

- Have I been careful not to utter God's Name casually? (Or worse yet: "I swear to G--!")

- When I use God's Name in a blessing or prayer, do I concentrate on the deeper meaning of His Name?
- Have I sworn or promised falsely while invoking God's Name?

42. For the mistakes we committed before You through baseless hatred.

The Talmud tells us that more than any other factor, hatred among Jews has been the cause of our long and bitter exile. Conversely, Jewish unity and true love between us is what will hasten our redemption.

Ask yourself:

- Was I disrespectful toward Jews who are not exactly like me in practice or philosophy?
- When I disagree with someone on an issue, have I let it degrade into a dislike for the person himself?
- When I saw a fellow Jew do evil, did I hate only the deed, or did it extend into a hatred for the person himself?
- When someone wronged me, was I eager to take revenge?
- When someone wronged me, did I bear a grudge?

43. For the mistakes we committed before You in extending the hand.

Ask yourself:

- Have I withheld from touching things that don't belong to me?
- Have I stretched forth my hand to the poor and the needy?
- Have I joined hands with wicked people?
- Have I extended my hand to help in community projects?

44. For the mistakes we committed before You through confusion of the heart.

The Sages tell us that ultimately all mistakes stem from a confusion of the heart. This is why on Yom Kippur we tap our chest as we go through this list of "Al Chet's."

Ask yourself:

- Have I not worked out issues because of laziness?
- Have I made mistakes because I emotionally did not want to accept what I logically knew to be correct?
- Have I properly developed my priorities and life goals?
- Am I continually focused on them?



Lively Parsha Yom Kippur

The silence in the desert shattered. Hagar's cries, as her child lay dying of thirst, reverberated to the Heavens. The angel called to her: *"The Almighty has heard the cries of the youth where he is*

there." A well of water materialized, and the life of Ishmael was spared. (Genesis 21:17)

The Midrash says that at that moment, the angels in heaven were mounting a campaign against the survival of Ishmael. In the future, when the Babylonians exiled the Jewish people, they would pass through Arabia. The Jews would ask their Ishmaelite cousins to have compassion and spare a little food. The Arabs, renowned for their hospitality (inherited from our common forefather Abraham), would give the Jews salty food (potato chips!). When the Jews would then request something to drink, they would be given leather bags that ostensibly contained water. However, when they would put them to their lips, the bags turned out to contain pressurized air, which rushed into their lungs, killing many Jews.

At this future scenario, the angels argued with the Almighty as Ishmael was dying in the desert: "How can You possibly save the progenitor of a nation that will later murder your children with thirst?" The answer that God gave - hearing the youth's cries *"where he is there"* - is the basis for all our hopes to receive forgiveness on Yom Kippur. (This is actually the Torah reading for the first day of Rosh Hashana.)

The Almighty always judges a person as he stands at the present time. The fact that God knows the future does not influence that judgment. At this moment, Ishmael deserves to live, and that is all that is pertinent now.

It is common for many people to fast and pray on Yom Kippur - and the very next day it's "back to the beach," with little practical change in one's life. If the Almighty would only peek into the future while we so piously confess our sins on Yom Kippur, the results would be disastrous. However, thanks to the lesson of Ishmael's story, there is hope. The Almighty judges at the present moment without looking at the future. If, right this minute, we sincerely intend to change our attitudes and mend our ways, we can receive atonement immediately.

The key word is sincerity. An entire 25-hour period in which we don't eat or drink, we resemble the angels, totally immersed in spirituality. Every minute of regretting our misdeed provides atonement and cleansing. If it were not such a solemn day, we should dance and sing for joy on Yom Kippur!

But if one's commitment only consists of the willingness to spend one day fasting and praying (albeit not an easy task), that is not enough. It is not realistic to effect real change from one day of prayers. If one sincerely intends to change - even if God sees that in future reality this person's resolve will not last - still that knowledge is overlooked and we are judged by *"where he is there."*

But we cannot fool the Almighty. A Jew must stand before his Creator on Yom Kippur and proclaims, "I realize I have made mistakes. I appreciate the magnitude of my mistakes and regret them. I have formulated a plan of action to avoid them in the future. I have already begun to implement the plan."

Let us try to conceptualize a practical, realistic approach to repentance.

The Talmud states that the punishment for not wearing the blue strand of tzitzit (which was expensive) is less severe than the consequence of not wearing the white strands (which were cheap). From this we learn an important principle: The more difficult it is to perform a mitzvah, the greater the reward. Conversely, the missed opportunity of an "easy mitzvah" is also great.

That's why, when we try to prepare a plan of action before Yom Kippur, we must keep in mind that "easy" misdeeds are the most severe. Hence we should first clean up the "easy way!"

We can do this by identifying what we want to improve, and dividing them into two categories: easy and difficult. Two examples:

Joe appreciates the importance of keeping a kosher home, but as a lawyer he often takes clients to lunch to discuss their cases. Since there is no kosher restaurant accessible, it is difficult for Joe to maintain strict standards of kashrut outside the home.

Susan finds not cooking on Shabbat to be a challenge. On Saturday morning, she would love to just whip up an omelet and enjoy! Yet she has no problem when it comes to the issue of switching off lights, which can easily be connected to an automatic timer.

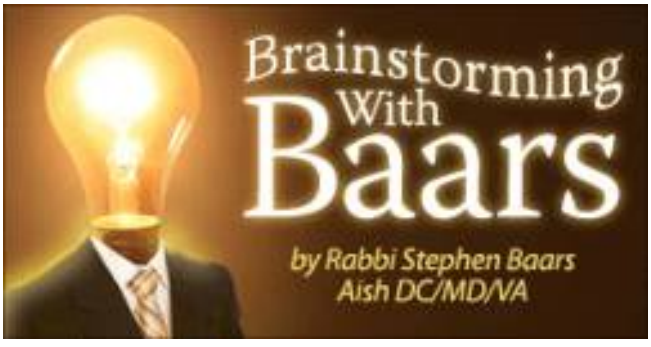
The first step in repentance is to firmly commit to doing the mitzvot that are "easy" for you. Then, after a period of a few weeks, an evaluation should be made. Maybe by now there are areas that once seemed hard, but now seem easier. Maybe you can add a few more "easy" aspects. For example, Joe could order the cottage cheese platter, which is a step forward, even though his real goal is to completely avoid eating in a non-kosher establishment. And Susan realizes she doesn't have to cook on Shabbat, since she can cook the food ahead of time and keep it warm on a hotplate.

The goal, of course, is to reach a total commitment. But in practical terms, this often must be a process over time. Eventually, when one is keeping kosher or Shabbat 80-90 percent, it is a reasonable leap to say, "Okay, I'll do it 100 percent."

It is important to start this process before Yom Kippur, so we can stand before the Almighty with a plan already begun.

And remember: The most dangerous period for an astronaut is re-entry into Earth's atmosphere. If you come down too fast you can burn up. Similarly, after the spiritual high of Yom Kippur, one must be careful to descend slowly. The first bit of gossip after Yom Kippur is the most severe...

Based on lectures and writings of Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe.



Dreams and limitations

> *"Every man's enemy is under his own ribs - i.e. his own desires."* (Chovot HaLavovot)

Why is it that some people, of seemingly no extraordinary talent, achieve way beyond that of their peers? Einsteins and Edisons are born out of systems that once declared them failures. What skills did they possess which allowed them to achieve so much?

We need only look inside ourselves to see that in the "modern" educational system, it is often not so much what you learn that makes for such greatness, but rather, what you don't learn.

> "There is one weapon which disables the mightiest of warriors and makes waste a hitherto invincible army. When 'I can't' is whispered ever so quietly from the heart of the bravest of men, the smallest mouse might as well be the most fortified tank, for against neither will this soldier do battle."

LEARNING LIMITATIONS

A child's first breath is as much a miracle for us and no less for the baby. After nine months, oxygen, which previously flowed through the fetus' veins from the mother's own blood, now has to be processed by an untested lung - an organ needing such precision and systems coordination that it would test the skills of a NASA technician.

The child does not think, "This is an impossible world, how can my lungs possibly process the oxygen I need?" Rather, it is unaware of any limitations, and knows not the pain of failure. Ridicule and defeat are not part of the infant's vocabulary.

Is a lung practical? Is the act of walking practical in a world where things do not stand on less than three legs? Everything for this child is possible, everything it will try.

Limitations are something it will learn.

All things have a good and a bad, a positive and a negative. Limitations similarly have these two aspects. It is sometimes important to realize one's limitations. But how much more do we tend to adopt the negative part of limitations? Imagine for a moment if Alexander Graham Bell had said, "You have to be practical." Where would the world be today!? Imagine if the unborn child could fathom the intricacies necessary to breathe, it would give up before even trying!

As children grow up, they learn apathy. Or to be more accurate, adults teach them.

WHO ARE WE?

How depressing a thought that we may be locked into some definition of who we are. But whose definition are we locked into? Surely it is only our own. The agility of our tongues to say a myriad of "I can't's" has destroyed our ability to dream. We are so clear and definite on what is and what is not possible, that we have become predictable. There is no spontaneity left in us. We have lost the spark in our living.

As we go through life, we remember our failures and hold on to them dearly. We analyze them, and deduce further what we can't do. This becomes

our lifetime baggage. Our mistakes shape our character and our personality by dulling our goals and dreams.

If we could just stop saying, "I can't," a new world would open up.

Try taking "I can't" out of your vocabulary. Be serious about it. Every time you say "I can't," give 10 dollars to charity.

THE ANNUAL OPPORTUNITY

Yom Kippur is about stopping the "I can'ts" and becoming an "I can" person. It is the day when we cast away the mistakes that define our limitations. On Yom Kippur, we affirm: "These mistakes are not me. It was merely a temporary lapse in judgement. I won't do it again. I can achieve greater and bigger. I only have to try."

King David tells us: *"[God] opens His hand and gives to all those who want"* (Psalm 145:16). In truth, we can do whatever we want. The only condition is that we have to "want." If we don't want, then God cannot give.

In the secular world, dreams are for Mary Poppins and Snow White. They are laughed at, ridiculed and patronized. As we grow older, we categorize dreams as fantasy and fairy tales. The "real world," we are told, is far more brutal.

Yom Kippur is a time to return. A time to dream again the wildest of dreams, and to plan their execution. A time to rethink and regain our refreshing hope in life.

BRAINSTORMING QUESTIONS TO PONDER

1. If you were born today with no concept of failure, what would you attempt to achieve?
2. When was the last time you developed a major new life dream? Do you spend time thinking about new dreams?
3. What have been your biggest dreams and life goals? How do you continue to nurture and pursue those dreams now?

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