

Jewish Ethics for Everyday Living

Yom Kippur 5775

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A few years ago, at Yom Kippur, I reflected. On this day, for as long as I can remember, I had confessed basically the same sins. Sure, the details changed, but my essential flaws did not.

I am not alone. Each person's misdeeds are different. All of us, though, struggle with repeated failings, year in and year out. The sad fact is that, no matter how honest our confessions and no matter how sincere our desire to change, the same sins – human frailties, manifested in misbehavior—continue to plague us, one Yom Kippur to the next. And these failings are anything but minor.

Al chet shechatanu lifanecha: For the sin we have committed repeatedly: Some have long been ethically slippery in financial matters, constantly finding false justifications for cheating business partners, customers, workers, or the government.

Al chet shechatanu lifanecha: For the sin we have committed repeatedly: Failures of generosity might have been your sin, year after year, as the needy continue to suffer.

Al chet shechatanu lifanecha: For the sin we have committed repeatedly: Perhaps, like me, you have pledged time and again to take better care of the body God gave you; but this year, too, some must admit that they have yet to quit smoking or eat right, address an alcohol or drug problem, or get out and exercise.

Al chet shechatanu lifanecha: For the sin we have committed repeatedly: Some are guilty of sexual immorality, year after year violating sanctified relationships and repeatedly profaning the sacred power to reproduce.

Al chet shechatanu lifanecha: For the sin we have committed repeatedly: Some, like me, have continually resolved to be more patient, to stop expecting others to move at our own lighting speed. And then, each year, as we hear *Kol Nidre*, we must again ask to be absolved of last year's vow of enhanced compassion, promising to do better in the new year.

Al het shechatanu lifanecha: For the sin we have committed repeatedly: You may choke when our prayer book confessional turns to gossip; you annually promise to guard your tongue, but the temptation to speak ill of others is just too alluring.

The list of sins is long. The years of our struggling to do better are even longer, as is the number of times we have pledged that we really will change this time. And yet here we are, on Yom Kippur again. And we are still castigating ourselves for the sins of last year, and of many years before that.

Whatever our pattern of misbehavior, we could become cynical about Yom Kippur itself. If we are confessing the same sins year over year, Yom Kippur could begin to feel like an empty ritual. After all, the ancient Rabbis taught, if one sins and repents, only to sin again, Yom Kippur does not provide atonement.

This year, though, I come before you with good news. I have embarked upon a pattern of Jewish study, paired with prayer and practice, known as Mussar. Mussar literally means "ethics," but I prefer to call it "Jewish Spirituality for Better Living." This year, I want to invite you to study with me, to pray with me, to practice with me, in an effort to break our unhealthy patterns. Together, we will examine

our souls, and we will become painfully more aware of what ails us and the people we hurt. Together, we will study treasures of our Jewish tradition. Together, we will find a way out of our sinful patterns.

Mussar is a tradition of Jewish ethical teaching, 1100 years old. In our own day, Mussar has been popularized in a book entitled *Everyday Holiness*, by Alan Morinis, who heads The Mussar Institute. In rabbinical school, I heard of Mussar, and had studied a few of its texts over the years, but was no expert. Then, a former congregant attended a Mussar Institute weekend, and he urged me to explore that aspect of the tradition more carefully. I read *Everyday Holiness*, and I took an online course. I trained to be a Mussar leader.

Mussar has made a difference in my life. As I have studied and engaged in the practice of Mussar, I have seen progress on those sins I was confessing annually. For example, I no longer reply rashly to irritating emails, and I made other strides. No, I did not become a paragon of patience. But when I fail, as I still do from time to time, Mussar gives me a process for reexamination.

I have been teaching Mussar a bit, here and there, since I arrived in Arkansas last summer. In fact, we will use Mussar techniques and Alan Morinis's book to discuss responsibility during our midday study today. Now, in the year ahead, I am eager to bring you Mussar in the more comprehensive program that has changed my life these last three and a half years.

I have invited Alan Morinis to be our Scholar-in-Residence next May. I am confident that his Shabbat sermon will be excellent, but we are not planning a one-night-stand. Instead, beginning later in February, we will establish Mussar study and practice groups – Tuesday nights and Sunday mornings – for as many as will submit to the possibility of better living through Jewish spirituality. Those of us who have been studying together will participate in a Shabbaton, a weekend of study, prayer and practice with our guest, deepening our shared commitment to change for the better, to break the patterns that make this Yom Kippur's confession so painful.

Mussar is not magic. It may change our lives, but Mussar is not a facile self-help scheme. It is also unlike the religious programs popular among Fundamentalists, promising success but bringing riches only to televangelists and publishers. Instead, Mussar is hard work.

Each week, we concentrate on a different "soul trait," be it humility or patience, gratitude or generosity, simplicity or truth. Morinis emphasizes that each person has an individual curriculum. Yes, we still study all the traits, but the emphases will be individualized. Humility, for example, runs the gamut. Some people arrogantly put themselves first at all times, with a callous disregard for others. On the other extreme, some are self-effacing to a fault, constantly letting others take advantage of their low self-esteem. Most are somewhere in between. We all need to confront our humility; but even on that one and the same subject, each of us has a personal lesson to learn.

With Mussar, practice is even more important than study. Each morning, we will recite an affirmation, and each evening we will write a private journal about that day's challenges to the soul trait of the week. For example, during the week we focus on truth, we may awaken each day to the words of the Torah, *midvar sheker tirchak*, "Keep far from falsehood." As we go through the day, some of us will pay closer attention to our tendency to play fast and loose with the truth. The little lie will suddenly sting, no longer crossing our lips without notice. Or we may find something very different: Some folks are never tempted to lie, but tell the truth too often and too harshly. Either way, we will write about it at the end of the day. This heightened awareness of our wrongdoing will lead to a change in behavior.

Each of us will be assigned a partner, and we learn from one another as we hold each other accountable for confronting the challenges before us. My study partner, for example, joked that I would have an easy time during the week we focused on *zerizut*, which I translate as “quickness.” The more we learned, though, we saw that the rabbis focus on prayer, meant to be offered early and often. By that measure, my laid-back colleague in Connecticut is quicker than this mile-a-minute southern Rabbi.

Each trait has unnumbered facets, so we will find ourselves challenged every week. As we turn to generosity, our minds may quickly jump to our charity. No doubt, some among us today, last year and for many years before that, confessed a failure to give sufficiently to needy individuals and worthy charitable causes. A smaller group might be feeling guilty about giving so much that our own families suffer, year after year. Mussar can help us break either cycle, and it can also help us by suggesting the role of generosity in circumstances we’ve never considered.

Alan Morinis tells the story of a small Jewish community in Eastern Europe. Each year, the leaders of the town would solicit the wealthier citizens, and most would respond generously to sustain the poor and support the synagogue. The wealthiest man in town, though, was despised as a miser. Annually, he would listen to the full appeal, hearing about the desperate poverty of widows and the need to repair the synagogue roof. Ultimately, though, the miser would always send the elders away with no more than a single coin. One year, as the annual appeal approached, a visiting scholar came to town. Hearing about the miser, he offered to assist in the solicitation. The town council begged the scholar not to waste his time. “We have tried everything,” they cried. “He is not a generous man.” But the scholar went ahead. At first, the encounter went as it always did. The miser produced his single coin, and the elders proceeded to tell the scholar, “We told you so,” and they began to depart. But the scholar responded generously. He profusely thanked the donor, waxing eloquent about the hungry orphan who would eat thanks to his generosity. Suddenly, to the shock of the town council, the man they knew as a miser chased them to the door, offering a second coin. The scholar again offered praise more generous than the donation, exclaiming that a letter in the holy Torah could now be repaired. Once more, the scholar and the councilors set out to leave, but the so-called miser chased them down the front path, this time with a sack full of riches, enough to sustain all the town’s poor and repair the synagogue roof. In the Mussar tradition, this story is not about the generosity of the former miser, important as that is. No, the moral is found in scholar’s generosity. The true test of our generosity is in our kindness to others, even when they do not deserve it.

The same lesson can apply to the most difficult situations in our personal lives. Consider the story of Susan, fictional, but based on a true story in *Everyday Holiness*. Twenty years ago, when Susan and her husband were engaged, her sister Beth was cruel and insensitive, insulting everything from Susan’s wedding dress to her fiancé himself. Enough was enough. Susan banned Beth from the wedding and would no longer speak to her sister, who was only too happy to return the favor. Years later, as a Mussar student, Susan studied the soul-trait of forgiveness, hopeful that she could give up her long-standing grudge and reconcile with her sister. But no amount of study helped. Beth was in the wrong, and no “forgiveness” text gave Susan any reason to apologize if she had done nothing wrong. Susan concluded that she could not forgive her sister. But then she studied generosity. Susan asked herself: “Do I have in me the generosity to respond to my sister as that scholar responded to the miser?” Only then did Susan find herself able to put the past aside, not to forgive but to write a generous and heartfelt letter, offering renewed love to her sister.

Mussar, I repeat, is not magic. We’ll leave the story of Susan and Beth here. It would be nice to imagine Beth’s responding with love and the sisters’ reestablishing their bond. And perhaps that would happen. No matter how Beth may respond, Susan would be liberated. Yom Kippur after Yom Kippur,

Susan had confessed the sin of bearing a grudge. She called herself unremittingly unforgiving. Now, though, maintaining her dignity, Susan would be free of that sin and could move forward in her own life. Generosity had freed her from sin.

On this Yom Kippur, let us be generous with ourselves. Let us give ourselves the gift of Mussar, Jewish spirituality for better living. Let us study and let us work hard, in community, so that we may be plagued by fewer of this year's sins on next Yom Kippur.

On this Yom Kippur, let us pray that God may be generous with us. We come before God today, filled with sin, and not for the first time. The ancient rabbis may teach that repeated sin is unforgiveable; but they also affirm that God is boundlessly merciful. We may be arrogant or bigoted, greedy or lustful, over and over again; but God waits endlessly for us to find a way out of our cycle of sin. With infinite generosity, God will take us back in love.

Amen.