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YOM KIPPUR READER

- p. 2 ABC's of Yom Kippur
- p. 5 It's Not My Fault!
- p. 7 5 Ways to Keep Your New Years Resolutions
- p. 10 The Crime I Didn't Commit
- p. 13 Exploring the Al-Chet Prayer

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ABC's of Yom Kippur

by Rabbi Shraga Simmons

Following the sin of the Golden Calf, Moses pleaded with God to forgive the people. Finally on Yom Kippur, atonement was achieved and Moses brought the second set of Tablets down from Mount Sinai.

From that day forward, every Yom Kippur carries with it a special power to cleanse our mistakes (both individually and collectively) and to wipe the slate clean.

Physical drives are muted, allowing a spiritual ascent.

This works on two conditions:

1) We do a process called teshuva -- literally "return." The process of teshuva involves four steps:

- Regret - acknowledging that a mistake was made, and feeling regret at having squandered some of our potential.
- Cessation - Talk is cheap, but stopping the harmful action shows a true commitment to change.
- Confession - To make it more "real," we admit our mistake verbally, and ask forgiveness from anyone we may have harmed.
- Resolution - We make a firm commitment not to repeat the harmful action in the future.

2) Though the combination of teshuva and Yom Kippur atones for transgressions against God, it does not automatically

erase wrongs committed against other people. It is therefore the universal Jewish custom -- some time before Yom Kippur -- to apologize and seek forgiveness from any friend, relative, or acquaintance whom we may have harmed or insulted over the past year.

Angel for a Day

On Yom Kippur, every Jew becomes like an angel. What are "angels?" Angels are completely spiritual beings, whose sole focus is to serve their Creator. The Maharal of Prague explains:

"All of the mitzvot that God commanded us on [Yom Kippur] are designed to remove, as much as possible, a person's relationship to physicality, until he is completely like an angel."

Just as angels (so to speak) stand upright, so too we spend most of Yom Kippur standing in the synagogue. And just as angels (so to speak) wear white, so too we are accustomed to wear white on Yom Kippur. Just as angels do not eat or drink, so too, we do not eat or drink.

This idea even has a practical application in Jewish law: typically, the second verse of the Shema, Baruch Shem, is recited quietly. But on Yom Kippur, it is proclaimed out loud - just like the angels do.

Five Aspects

There are five areas of physical involvement which we remove ourselves from on Yom Kippur:

1. Eating and drinking
2. Washing
3. Applying oils or lotions to the skin
4. Marital relations
5. Wearing leather shoes

Throughout the year, many people spend their days focusing on food, work, material possessions

(symbolized by shoes) and superficial pleasures (symbolized by anointing). On Yom Kippur, we restore our priorities to what really counts in life.

As Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler writes:

"On Yom Kippur, the power of the [physical] inclination is muted. Therefore, one's yearning for spiritual elevation reasserts itself, after having lain dormant as a result of sin's deadening effect on the soul. This rejuvenation of purpose entitles a person to special consideration and forgiveness."

Structure of the Day

The Talmud says that on Rosh Hashana, the Books of Life and Death are open and God writes who will be granted another year of life. For many, this decision hangs in the balance for 19 days until Yom Kippur, when the final decision is sealed. The prayers of Yom Kippur are designed to stir us to mend our ways. Some highlights:

- The Yom Kippur prayers begin before sundown with the haunting melody of Kol Nidrei. The Torah scrolls are all removed

from the Ark, and the chazzan (cantor) chants the Kol Nidrei prayer three times, each with greater intensity.

- The special Yom Kippur Amidah (standing prayer) incorporates the Al-Chet confession of our various mistakes. With each mention of a mistake, we lightly beat our chest with the fist - as if to say that it is our impulses that got the best of us.
- The Yizkor service - said in memory of loved ones - is recited following the morning Torah reading.
- The lengthy Mussaf service features a recounting of the Yom Kippur service in the Holy Temple in Jerusalem. A highlight was the High Priest entering the Holy of Holies - the only person to do so, this one time a year. The Mussaf service also records how the High Priest would pronounce God's holy name, and in response the assembled Jews would prostrate on the ground. When reaching these passages, we too prostrate ourselves on our hands and knees.
- At the Mincha service, we read the Book of Jonah, the biblical story of a prophet who tried to "flee from God" and wound up swallowed into the belly of a huge fish.
- While a regular weekday has three prayer services, and Shabbat and holidays have four, Yom Kippur is the only day of the year that has five. This final prayer is called Ne'ilah, literally the "closing of the gates," which serves as the final chance to ensure that our decree for the year is "sealed" in the Book of Life. At the conclusion of Ne'ilah, the shofar is sounded - one long blast, signifying our confidence in having passed the High Holidays with a good judgment.

With each mistake, we lightly beat our chest.

The Fast Itself

The Yom Kippur fast begins at sundown, and extends 25 hours until the following nightfall.

The afternoon before Yom Kippur, it is a special mitzvah to eat a festive meal.

As far as making your fast easier, try to pace your intake throughout the previous day by eating something every two hours. Watermelon and grape juice are helpful before a fast.

At the festive meal itself, eat a moderate portion of food so as not to speed up the digestion process. Also, don't drink any coffee or coke, because caffeine is a diuretic. Heavy coffee drinkers can also avoid the dreaded headache by slowly reducing the amount of consumption over the week leading up to Yom Kippur.

After a meal we generally get thirstier, so when you complete the festive meal, leave some extra time before sundown to drink. Also, drinking lukewarm water with some sugar can help make you less thirsty during the fast.

In Case of Illness

If someone is ill, and a doctor is of the opinion that fasting might pose a life-danger, then the patient should eat or drink small amounts. The patient should try to eat only about 30 ml (one fluid ounce) and wait nine minutes before eating again. Once nine minutes have passed, one can eat this small amount again, and so on throughout the day.

With drinking, he should try to drink less than what the Talmud calls "melo lugmav"

-- the amount that would fill a person's puffed-out cheek. While this amount will vary from person to person, it is approximately 35 ml (just over one fluid ounce) and one should wait nine minutes before drinking again.

How does consuming small amounts make a difference? In Jewish law, an act of "eating" is defined as "consuming a certain *quantity* within a certain *period of time*." Otherwise, that's not eating, it's "nibbling" - which although prohibited on Yom Kippur, there is room to be lenient when one's health is at stake.

The reason for all these technicalities is because eating on Yom Kippur is regarded as one of the most serious prohibitions in the Torah. So while there are leniencies in certain situations, we still try to minimize it.

Note that eating and drinking are treated as independent acts, meaning that the patient can eat and drink together during those nine minutes, and the amounts are not combined.

Having said all this, if these small amounts prove insufficient to prevent the health danger, the patient may even eat and drink regularly. In such a case, a person does not say Kiddush before eating, but does recite "Grace After Meals," inserting the "ya'aleh veyavo" paragraph.

Now what about a case where the patient's opinion conflicts with that of the doctor? If the patient is certain he needs to eat to prevent a danger to health, then we rely on his word, even if the doctor disagrees. And in the opposite scenario -- if the patient refuses to eat despite doctors' warnings -- then we persuade the patient to eat, since it is possible that his judgment is impaired due to illness.

Wishing you an easy fast and a meaningful Yom Kippur!

It's Not My Fault!

by Ruthie Simon

The late Charles Schultz has a Peanuts cartoon where the authoritarian Lucy is busy handing out to her friends lists of their faults and imperfections. When challenged by Charlie Brown as to how she has the right to do this, she responds, "I want to make this a better world for me to live in."

We live in a "me" society, where it is easy to rationalize our mistakes and blame others for our wrongdoing.

The Talmud (Avoda Zara 17a) offers a fascinating narrative with a twist on the lengths to which this self-centeredness may extend.

We are introduced to a man named Elazar ben Durdaya who was an infamous sinner with a particular addiction for pleasures of the flesh. Once he heard of a particular courtesan reputed to be both very beautiful and very expensive. His appetite was aroused, and although she plied her trade in a far-off land, he enthusiastically journeyed to meet her.

During the visit she blurted out how Elazar ben Durdaya would never be capable of making amends and repenting for his self-indulgent ways. Elazar was shaken by her remarks and abruptly left her services, fleeing to the mountains and hills. The Talmud proceeds to describe how he pleaded with the forces of nature to pray on his behalf that he should be forgiven.

Rabbi Yoel Schwartz suggests that the Sages interpret this to mean that when Elazar ben Durdaya appealed to the forces of nature, it was his way of attempting to shift the blame. He explains as follows:

"Mountains and hills, pray for me!" The Hebrew for mountain, *harim*, can be interpreted as *horim*, parents. In other words, Elazar ben Durdaya blames his parents for his problems. After all, it is they who brought him into this world. How many of us believe we are but products of our nurturing. If only our upbringing had been different! If only we could have chosen different parents. If only they had raised me differently and not been so indulging... or demanding... or controlling. If only...

Finding no effective succor in the mountains, Elazar despairs and turns to the heavens and the earth: "Pray for me!"

"Heavens" refers to the lofty spiritual leaders. Like Elazar ben Durdaya, how often do we wish to blame our teachers and rabbis for our faults? "After all," we contend, "if only these people had not been so distant and out of touch. It was because of them that I became disenchanted and alienated from my Judaism. If only they had been more approachable. If only they could have addressed where I was coming from."

When Elazar turns to blame the "earth" it represents our environment, friends and social milieu. The "guys in the bar" and other social influences corrupted me. It is the people who I befriended and hung out with that are to blame for the way I have become! If only I could have had different friends. If only a different peer group had been around.

If only we could have chosen different parents.

Elazar then runs to the sun and the moon. This represents the glitz and bright lights of society. Today, that would mean our exposure to non-stop entertainment that has molded us. It is easy to believe we are simply products of the media and music that dance before us. The internet and advertisements capture and bedazzle us. If only we hadn't been so affected by Hollywood, 24/7 satellite channels, the iPods, video messaging, reality TV and Internet blogs that bombard us through no apparent fault of our own!

When Elazar is not able to convince the sun and the moon to accept responsibility for his actions, he turns to plead with the stars and the constellations. He declares that he was not able to control his lustful tendencies because he was born under the wrong star. It was all written in the constellations and predestined. If only he had had control over when he was born.

Just as Elazar grudgingly comes to accept that the forces of nature have no responsibility for his problems, he goes and sinks his head between his knees and weeps - not out of self pity, but out of remorse. He weeps until his soul leaves him.

At that moment, the Talmud concludes, a heavenly voice proclaimed: "Rabbi Elazar ben Durdaya is appointed for life in the world to come." A moment of profound remorse counteracted a lifetime of debauchery; he himself had even earned the honorific of "rabbi."

Then the Talmud adds a coda: When the great Rabbi Yehuda the Prince heard of this striking incident, he also cried and exclaimed: "There are those who attain their eternal reward over many years, and there are those who attain it in one moment."

Only Yitro Heard

Rabbi Yehuda's emotional reaction has a powerful message for all of us as we think of our own teshuva (repentance).

Was Rabbi Yehuda crying because he realized that while he lived piously, Elazar ben Durdaya indulged in every lust he could discover? Perhaps Rabbi Yehuda feels it unjust that he and his peers live lives of restraint while Elazar abuses the system and gets to the same place in the end?

No. This is too petty and cynical a reaction for one as great as Rabbi Yehuda.

The mystery is solved by a 20th century sage, Rabbi Chaim Shmulevitz, late dean of the Mir Yeshiva. In order to understand Rabbi Yehuda's reaction, Rabbi Shmulevitz carries us back in time to an incredibly stirring event in Jewish history, the splitting of the Red Sea.

Many generations ago, when the Jewish people had fled Pharaoh's harsh rule, they escaped slavery's clutches only to be chased by the Egyptian chariots. Upon reaching the Red Sea, one man took the initiative to jump into the sea's turbulent waters. Once he put his foot in the water, the sea miraculously split, allowing the Jewish people to pass through unharmed.

The Torah tells us that everyone who heard of the splitting of the Red Sea was amazed. Yet only Yitro, Moses' father-in-law, decided to act upon the experience. Out of tens of thousands, he alone made lasting changes.

This is why Rabbi Yehuda cried. He realized that in life we have countless opportunities to capture the moments of

Some attain their eternal reward in one moment.

inspiration and acquire eternal greatness. Sometimes the inspirations are pleasant ones, like watching a baby's first steps or admiring a sunset. Sometimes the awakening comes in the form of a terror attack or a tsunami.

Yet how many of us, like Yitro, experience events and actually change ourselves?

Rabbi Yehuda cried over Elazar ben Durdaya, because he realized that Elazar was capable of profound greatness. But oh what a shame that he wasted the best years of his life chasing after vanities. Imagine if Elazar had had his awakening years earlier. Imagine how great he would be! That lost potential is what brought Rabbi Yehuda to tears.

God already knows what's holding us back.

Free Choice

How many times do we have fleeting moments of inspiration, and our inner

complacently ticks on? How many times do we hear alarm bells ringing and we fail to harness the moment of opportunity, preferring to return to our ignorant slumber?

If we would only listen, we too could be inspired to grow and make a difference in ourselves and in the world. It happened to Yitro. It happened, at the last possible moment, to Elazar ben Durdaya. If we choose wisely and take action, it can happen to us.

This year on Yom Kippur, let us realize that we are responsible for our life. When we ask for forgiveness, we are not plowing through our long list to inform God. He already knows. We need to inform ourselves. Because while God can and wants to help, ultimately it is we, through the power of free choice, who need to effect the necessary change.

5 Ways to Keep Your New Years Resolutions

by Dina Coopersmith

Despite our resolve to change and grow this year, how many of us have already started slipping back into old modes of behavior and bad habits? As past experience has taught us, making the decision to change does not guarantee change. Don't be discouraged. Here are five practical ideas to help you stick to your resolutions and reach true growth.

1. Focus Only On Today

Strive to grow today, in the present moment. Don't worry about having messed up in the past. It's over, and you can change and grow today. And don't worry about the future; you're not there yet. Just take it one day at a time.

As it says in the Torah, "You are all standing today before God" (Deut 29:9). Specifically today - not in the past or the future, but you are standing here today.

So if you resolved to shed that excess weight and adopt a more healthy lifestyle, don't think about the holidays and all the food you've consumed. That's in the past. And don't worry about all the meals you'll be having during Sukkot and how on earth you'll manage to stick with the salads. That's the future. Just focus on today - that you can handle. The days will add up on their own and create momentum.

2. Develop a Strategy

Every goal needs a clear-cut plan of action in order to come to fruition. You've done some honest introspection and clarified your goal. Now how are you going to get there? What do you need to change to accomplish this goal?

You can't do a complete overhaul of your entire life all at once. You need to develop a long-term plan, even one that could take a lifetime, and make sure you're heading in the right direction. Break it down into manageable baby steps that you're confident you can keep and will lead to results.

For example, let's say this year you want to become a better parent. You might write up a plan:

- Sign up for 3 month parenting course that starts end of October
- Read one recommended parenting book before end of November
- December: keep daily tabs on how many times I lose my temper with the kids

- January: keep journal of daily loving things I do for my children

- February: choose one main idea from course which I will implement in my daily life.

The simpler, the better. Each small step you take in the right direction is monumental! As our sages say, "Open up an opening for Me like the eye of the needle, and I will open up for you and opening through which wagons can enter" (Shir HaShirim Rabba 5:3).

3. Make it Happen Automatically

Don't trust yourself that you'll always feel as strongly about your aspirations as you do now, or that you'll be able to consistently remember and carry out your commitments. If there's a way to create a situation that almost forces you externally to do what you know deep down is the right thing -- without having to count on your own decision at every given moment -- then you stand a much greater chance of getting the job done.

For instance, if you decided you should be giving \$200 a month to charity, arrange with your bank to automatically send this sum to the organization of your choice on a certain day every month. Or write out 12 postdated checks and put them in stamped envelopes ready to send out on the first of every month. Somehow make sure it's out of your hands.

If you want to increase your amount of Torah learning this year, get a study partner or sign up for a "Partners in Torah" program, where someone is paired up to study with you over the phone. Knowing that someone is counting on you to be there increases the chances that it will happen.

Stick to your resolutions and reach true growth.

4. Say it Out Loud

This is one of the 48 Ways to Wisdom, mentioned in Ethics of the Fathers (Avot 6:6).

Speech is a uniquely human characteristic. It is the way we translate a spiritual thought into a physical reality. Articulation makes an idea real. It also forces you to focus on what the words mean and achieve clarity and inner resonance with the concept.

For instance, take a moment and think: What do I really want to work on improving this year? Then say out loud: "I'm committed to working on becoming a better spouse and getting rid of my anger." Say it a few times and see if you mean it. If it sounds good and resonates with you, it is becoming an actual reality, as opposed to a lofty notion in your mind.

When it comes to our High Holiday aspirations, it's easy to think idealistic thoughts, but they may not be practical or concrete until we verbalize them. Once you articulate clearly what you truly desire to accomplish and how you plan to achieve your goals, you get to know yourself better, what are your blocks and obstacles, and you stand a much greater chance of bringing potential into actuality.

Suppose you make a decision to make time in your day for prayer. Play your own devil's advocate and challenge yourself in a real dialogue (well, monologue really):

"I'm really going to start praying every day."

"I doubt that. It hasn't worked all last year. Why should it work this year? Convince me."

"That's because I was so distracted with the kids and getting them off to school."

"So how will you avoid those distractions this year?"

"I will wake up 20 minutes earlier every day and be much more organized."

"Mmmm. What are the chances you will do that?"

"What do you mean? I bought an alarm clock and am all set to go!"

"Great! Go for it! Is it set for the right time tomorrow morning?"

Of course, don't do this in public. You don't want people to think you've gone off the deep end. But in a quiet room, read out your list of resolutions to yourself and see if you find yourself resisting anything, or if there are some hazy, unclear aspects to your plan. Then argue it out with yourself!

5. Involve a Friend

Tell a trusted friend or spouse, teacher or confidante about your goals for the coming year. If they're willing to spend the time with you, ask them to work out a plan with you that seems realistic. Tell them to feel free to keep tabs on you and remind you about your resolutions. A best-case scenario is to establish a daily or weekly check-in phone call where you can gauge your progress, discuss how things are going, and perhaps study together from a book which explores the issue and inspires growth in the area in which you have resolved to change.

Shana tova and good luck with the growth you're going to accomplish today.

Ask a friend to help keep tabs on your progress.

The Crime I Didn't Commit

by Sara Yoheved Rigler

Circuit Court Judge Alice Gilbert had an innovative idea. She required every person convicted in her courtroom -- for crimes ranging from manslaughter to passing bad checks -- to write a 2,000-word essay answering four questions:

1. How did my crime affect me?
2. How did my crime affect my family?
3. How did my crime affect the community?
4. What can be done to prevent such crimes in the future?

On a recent visit to Michigan, I stayed with Judge Gilbert (who happens to be my cousin). I was intrigued by her brilliant idea of requiring convicts to confront the consequences of their actions, which surely had reduced recidivism in her district. Judge Gilbert, after 28 years on the bench, is now retired, but she keeps two boxes of the compulsory essays (with names deleted) in her basement. Always interested in the process of changing human behavior, I asked to read some of the essays.

I picked out the most severe crimes: a drunken driver who had killed a teenage girl; a high school student who had given birth to a baby, stuffed him into her closet and went off to school; a guy who had robbed a gas station and killed a hapless customer. With great anticipation, I sat down to read these dramatic confrontations of human beings with their shadow selves, these epiphanies of the

damage they had caused to themselves and their loved ones, and the flood of contrition surely unleashed by such honest soul-searching.

No go! What I read instead was essay after essay explaining why the writer was not really guilty of the crime. Totally ignoring the four questions, each convict wrote at length -- some far exceeding 2,000 words -- of how events had conspired to produce the horrific outcome and that it was absolutely, positively not the fault of the writer.

Why is it so hard for people to admit they did wrong?

The drunk driver, whom I'll call Frank, started by complaining that although it was sad that "this young girl, who should be alive, isn't," (he could not even own up to the word "dead,") that was no reason that her friends and relatives should be harassing him with telephone calls and notes, both at home and at work. Frank went on to describe what had really happened that dark night when he was driving the pick-up truck. It was the fault of the weather; the rain made for low -- in fact, no -- visibility. It was the fault of the girl herself and the man who was with her; they had hit a dog (proving no visibility!) and she was sitting in the middle of the road trying to help the dog, while the man was doing a lousy job of redirecting traffic around her. It was the fault of the police, who failed to test Frank's breath, which would have proven beyond a shadow of a doubt that the two glasses of wine he had drunk could not have inebriated a man of his weight.

Change for the New Year starts with owning up.

(And why, pray tell, did the police not test Frank's breath? Because both Frank and his companion Doris claimed that Doris was driving the pick-up. So the police tested Doris's breath. Only later investigation revealed that Frank was indeed the driver.) Frank was adamant that the incompetent police should have figured out at the scene of the accident that he was driving (despite his own lies) and they should have given him a breath test immediately.

As for the high school girl and the dead baby, she didn't realize she was pregnant until the baby started coming out, and she did everything she could to save the baby's life, and ...

Why is it so hard for people to admit they did wrong? The first step in the process of teshuvah, of changing one's behavior, is to admit, "I did it!" A Jew confesses transgressions not to a priest or any other human being, but to God. Trying to change without admitting wrong-doing is like trying to ski without snow.

The Shrek Fallacy

Two major obstacles keep us humans from that simple act of admitting wrong-doing. The first is a sense of "I'm as rotten as my sins." The human ego is too wobbly a table to load it up with a couple hundred pounds of wrong-doings. If I admit that I cheated on my exams, then I'm a despicable, dishonest cheat. If I admit that my outbursts of anger traumatize my children/employees/friends, then I'm an out-of-control, savage ogre. My wrong actions are not simply the garments that clothe my essential self; they become my image of who I really am.

This misconception derives from the "Shrek fallacy." As Shrek famously declared, "Ogres are like onions. They have layers," meaning that they are complex beings with multiple layers of personality components. Since human beings, too, have layers, the faulty syllogism is that human beings are like onions. This is a lethal analogy because, if you take an onion apart, layer by layer, in the end you will find... nothing.

This fear, that we are nothing but the sum total of our personality traits and actions with nothing inside, leads to the existential angst that fuels justification and rationalization at the expense of truly admitting our faults. Justification and rationalization are splintery boards to bolster up the wobbly table.

The soul is like a candle flame. It cannot be tarnished, soiled, or stained in any way.

Judaism counters the Shrek fallacy with the assertion that a human being is essentially a Divine soul. If you take off the layers of personality and actions, you will find shining within a perfect, pure, immutable Divine soul.

The soul is like a candle flame. It cannot be tarnished, soiled, or stained in any way. Transgressions are like curtains strung around the flame. Many layers of thick curtains, especially room-darkener curtains, can shroud the flame so that its light is totally invisible, but the flame is unaffected.

The more a person, through the spiritual practices enjoined by the Torah, identifies with this inner core of spirituality, with this perfect, immutable Divine soul, the

The essential soul cannot be tarnished in any way.

more courage the person will have to admit wrongdoing. The person realizes that sin adheres to the essential self as little as dirt adheres to fire -- not at all. Thus teshuvah is predicated on establishing a sense of oneself as a soul, on connecting to one's inner core of good. From that bulwark, confession of wrongdoing proceeds not as a paralyzing, guilt-inducing exercise, but as the first step in taking down the curtains that veil the soul.

The "I Can't Change" Fallacy

My daughter and I are planning a trip to Hawaii. I spent more than three mind-boggling hours yesterday on the internet, comparing flight prices, researching vacation packages, reading descriptions about various hotels, exploring the possibilities for kosher food, and investigating tours of Maui. I never would have invested so much time and energy if I didn't believe that my daughter and I would eventually get to Hawaii. If I were toying with travel to an impossible destination -- impossible because the place, like Shangri-la, is a fantasy that does not exist or because the place, like North Korea, is off limits to American citizens -- I would not have invested myself in planning the journey.

To admit your wrongdoings in order to plunge into the journey called teshuvah requires belief that you can actually arrive at the destination: real change. This conviction is undermined by the fallacy that your actions are determined by heredity and environment, and therefore you cannot change. If teshuvah is your Shangri-la or North Korea, you'll never embark on the journey.

Judaism insists that human beings have free will in the moral sphere. Yes, everything is determined by God except your choices between right and wrong. You can choose not to cheat on your exams, not to yell at your children, not to gossip, not to carry a grudge, etc. Free choice is, in fact, what distinguishes humans from the animal kingdom.

People can change. Don't we all know someone who smoked for decades and then, after a heart attack, never picked up another cigarette?

The "I Can't Change" fallacy is fueled by your past failures at reaching your desired destination. Mark Twain quipped, "Quit smoking? It's easy! I've done it dozens of times." If you have tried to stop smoking (or yelling or cheating or gossiping) many times, and each time you succumbed to the habit, then you are easy prey for the "I Can't Change" fallacy.

But don't we all know someone who smoked for decades and then, after a heart attack, went cold turkey and never picked up another cigarette? Don't we all know a recovering alcoholic who, through persevering in a 12-step program, stopped drinking? I personally know people who, through the Jewish method of Mussar, changed themselves from screaming banshees who yelled at their kids several times a day to parents who almost never yell at their kids.

The travel brochure for the destination called "Teshuvah" promises that it's a long and arduous journey, but you can get there. And when you do, you'll realize it was worth the trip.

If the destination is unrealistic, you'll never undertake the journey.

Exploring the Al-Chet Prayer

by Rabbi Shraga Simmons

A prime feature of the Yom Kippur service is recitation of the 44 mistakes known as "Al Chet." That's a long list. What does it all really mean?

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, draining - and ultimately unproductive.

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. These 44 statements 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? 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?

Getting to the root of the problem can eliminate it entirely.

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?

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 would otherwise not 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?

You don't have to say everything you think.

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? Did I check my email or answer my cell phone while listening to a friend, thus denying them my full attention? Have I made a conscious effort to become 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. Ask yourself:

- **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 own children? Am I giving that now to my parents? Do I give special attention to the needs of the elderly?

Reaching out to others taps into the unity of God's universe.

• **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, consider: "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?

Did I waste time by talking about trivial things?

A person's character traits are revealed at the dinner table.

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? Do I spend time viewing inappropriate web sites? 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? Do I forward inane emails and post trivial content online? 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. "Shame" 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?

A person's eyes are the window to the soul.

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 waste countless hours on the Internet with no goal or purpose in mind? Do I act with proper reverence when 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:

Do I spend hours on the Internet with no purpose?

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 the key to our ultimate 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?

Jewish unity is the key to our ultimate redemption.
