

SHUN EVIL AND DO GOOD

When financier Bernard Madoff was first arrested and the lengthy list of the people and agencies his schemes had hurt became known, one of his victims, the Nobel prize winning writer and famous Holocaust survivor, Elie Wiesel, suggested an appropriate punishment for Madoff: He should sit in a jail cell by himself for the rest of his life with an endless loop video on at all times. The video would feature his victims telling Madoff just exactly how he had ruined their lives. Another of Madoff's victims turned a Jewish expression on its head the day Madoff was sentenced. Upon hearing the life sentence, he sent the traditional Jewish birthday blessing in Madoff's direction: "May he live to 120."

The Madoff scandal highlights the message of this day of Yom Kippur in stark terms. We speak of sin and forgiveness on this day. We seek atonement. And yet the likes of Bernard Madoff make us wonder if there are some sins that are unforgivable and for which there can never be atonement.

Our tradition teaches that forgiveness is always possible for one who is truly contrite and has sincerely repented. However, there is one caveat, as taught in the Mishnah: In the case of sins between human beings, the sinner has to make amends with the aggrieved party before he can gain atonement from God. (Mishnah Yoma 8:9)

Is it possible for Bernard Madoff to make amends with all of the people he has wronged? Undoubtedly not. The reach of his misdeeds is so great--to individuals and charities and all the people they serve--or would have served if they did not lose their endowments because of Madoff. How could he ever make amends with them all, even if he tried? For Madoff, therefore, there may never be atonement. But for the rest of us, God willing, atonement is within reach.

Atonement is something only God can grant, after we have done our work of teshuvah, repentance. Rabbi Marc Gellman of God Squad fame likes to explain the concept of atonement to children by taking a wooden board and driving several nails into it. He then removes the nails and shows the children the board with the holes in it. The nails, Gellman explains, represent our sins. The holes, he says, are what's left after we have apologized to others for our sins. He teaches that just as the holes in the board are permanent, we can never completely restore the damage our sins have brought about. Still, says Gellman, there is one way that the holes can be filled in enough to enable us to go on with our lives, and that is through God's chesed, or lovingkindness. It is that chesed which we seek from God as atonement on Yom Kippur. Even after the most egregious sins, having a sense of God's chesed is a way that we can continue to lead worthwhile and productive, though imperfect, lives.

Our sins are few and miniscule compared to the transgressions of a Bernie Madoff. And so, we should consider ourselves fortunate that we have the ability to make amends to those we have wronged. We still have time before the Gates of Repentance close tomorrow at sunset.

Jewish tradition is very specific about how successful teshuvah is to be done so that we can seek God's chesed and be whole once again. It outlines five stages to successful repentance: To recognize the sin, to feel remorse, to undo the damage that was done, to pacify the victim, and to resolve never to commit the sin again. (Telushkin, Jewish Literacy, p. 597)

Clearly, there are parts of this process that we cannot reasonably be expected to accomplish before the gates close tomorrow. We can take time to acknowledge our sins. We can express sincere remorse, and speak to those we have wronged. But, undoing the damage that was done by our misdeeds and proving that we can resist the temptation to sin again will have to wait until after Yom Kippur. The process of teshuvah is ongoing--it continues beyond this one day.

Though not easy, the process involved in resisting the same sin, or as Maimonides put it, to abstain even when confronted with "the same woman, the same season, the same place"(Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Teshuvah, 2:1) is probably self-explanatory. It is about self-control. But how to undo the damage our misdeeds inflicted on another is less clear. The 13th century Spanish rabbi, Jonah Gerondi, provides a helpful guide:

The repentant sinner should strive to do good with the same faculties with which he sinned.... If his feet had run to sin, let them now run to the performance of the good. If his mouth had spoken falsehood, let it now be opened in wisdom. Violent hands should now open in charity.... The trouble-maker should become a peacemaker." (Quotation appears in Telushkin, ibid, p. 598)

Using Gerondi's idea, we can be creative about how to use this model for our own damage control. Some real-life stories might serve as helpful examples.

A couple of years ago, you will remember there was a horrendous tragedy here in Kenosha when a three year old child found his father's loaded and unlocked gun in a bedside table and shot himself in the chest. The child died. Recently, the front page of the newspaper featured a story about the father. He says that, even though he did not fire the gun, he looks in the mirror every day and sees his son's murderer. And yet, in spite of this man's unimaginable guilt and regret, now that he has completed his sentence, the father goes to groups and talks about gun safety. He does this perhaps as a form of penance, and because he wants to spare other families the tragedy and pain he knows. In Gerondi's words, the father is "doing good with the same faculties with which he sinned." Since his own gun was the cause of his child's death, teaching how to handle guns safely is now his cause.

Another example: When Senator Edward Kennedy died, his life story was reviewed in great detail. The story could never be told without recalling Chappaquiddick and his years of drinking and womanizing. Kennedy's critics cannot forgive those transgressions, which define him in their eyes. But, in truth, the real story in Kennedy's life is not the bad, even unforgivable, behavior that clouded much of his life and may have ruined his chances to become President. The real story is how he overcame that past and truly restored himself in his last decades. He built a loyal and lasting marriage, he gave up alcohol, and he spoke openly about his failures, including Chappaquiddick. In his memoir, he wrote: "that night on Chappaquiddick Island ended in a horrible tragedy that haunts me every day of my life. (True Compass) Still, in spite of his transgressions, which were always agonizingly with him, Kennedy continued on to fight for his own redemption as well as for other people and causes. In Rabbi Gerondi's words, his "feet had run to sin," and later in his life, he was "let(ting) them run to the performance of the good."

We can extrapolate from these examples to how we might make amends for our own transgressions by "doing good with the same faculties with which we sinned," as suggested by Rabbi Gerondi. Forgiving ourselves for wrongdoing can be one of the hardest pieces of atonement. Performing deeds that turn our sins around will help us to recover a sense of self-worth and self-pride.

If we have hurt another's feelings through cruel gossip, we can use our mouths from here on to speak only words of kindness and refuse to listen when others share gossip with us.

If we have been stingy with our time for those closest to us, we can begin to consciously carve out time on our calendars and make that appointment as unchangeable as any other when others seek our attention.

If we have not carried our weight in our families or jobs or other obligations, we can take on a greater burden of the work in the year to come.

If we have tried to control others, we can relinquish control, make ourselves smaller, and let others find themselves by filling the void.

If we have failed to show empathy for other people's concerns and problems, we can give and listen even when no one expects it, in even the smallest ways--sending a note, making a phone call, paying a visit, bringing food or flowers.

The damage we have caused by our past misdeeds is still real. But these kinds of behavior reversals can help to release us from the shame and regret of wrongs we have committed.

As we face this last day of our penitential season, we have the chance to remove the nails from our boards and examine the holes that are left. We all have holes in our boards. Some have more or less, smaller or larger spaces, depending on the number and severity of the transgressions we have committed. None of us can restore our board to its original state. But, with God's help, we can find it intact enough to persevere in our daily pursuits and do much good. That's what this day is all about, as we pray to God for chesed, to grant atonement.

The writer of the Psalms addressed beautifully this goal of restoring ourselves after wrongdoing, as we read in Psalm 34:

Mi haish hechafetz chayim...?

Who is the one who is eager for life, who desires years of good fortune?

Guard your tongue from evil and your lips from deceitful speech.

Shun evil and do good,

Seek amity and pursue it...

The Eternal One is close to the brokenhearted;

those crushed in spirit God delivers.... (Ps 34: 13-15, 19)

All of us are eager for life, so let us shun evil and replace it with good by seeking out those we have wronged, taking the hard step of asking forgiveness with contrite spirits, and then committing to doing the hard work of repairing the damage we have done in the weeks and months to come. In so doing, God will be with us, filling in our holes, granting atonement, and raising up our broken spirits with chesed, lovingkindness. Kein y'hi ratzon. So may it be.