

Thou Shalt Change; Thou Shalt Not Change

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Rabbi David Stern tells the story of his teenage irreverence one Yom Kippur, when he accosted his father, the rabbi, with “this snarky declaration: ‘Judaism obviously doesn’t have a lot of confidence in our capacity to repent. If it did, we wouldn’t have to recite the same sins every Yom Kippur.’”ⁱ More troubling than the sameness of the prayer book’s confession, year after year, is our own, personal self-evaluation. When we look into our souls, the wrongdoing that comes to mind feels hauntingly familiar, one year to the next.

A person who was short-tempered last year is still quick to anger this Yom Kippur, whatever improvement came as a result of last year’s repentance. People who confessed laziness at last year’s High Holy Days probably still find themselves less than eager to get all the work done this year. And a person who lies, well, that’s a hard habit to break, even with sincere effort.

On these High Holy Days, we appeal for forgiveness to a God we call *Avinu* and *Malkeinu*, Almighty and Merciful. But here’s the question: When do we want God to be *Avinu*, forgiving, like a loving parent? When we have sinned! When do we want God to be *Malkeinu*, strict, like a judge? When somebody else has sinned, particularly against us!

A compassionate God will understand why we have not changed as much as we promised last Yom Kippur. We are fundamentally flawed, which is to say that we are human. And we are all, each and every one of us, resistant to change.

When we look at other people’s failings, we may be awfully unlike that kindhearted God. We ask the addict, “Why can’t you just stop, once and for all?” We ask the person on welfare, “Why don’t you just get a job?” Those who have never struggled with their weight, even if too polite to say anything, observe obesity and wonder, “Why can’t they just eat less or exercise?” The questions are facile, particularly when we’re dealing with people we don’t know, problems we don’t personally experience, and those whose lives are very different from our own.

Suffering from a mental illness, including addiction, is not sinful. Still, we can learn valuable information from those struggles.

People with severe mental illness, such as bipolar disorder, are frequently not compliant with treatment. Many don’t take their medication. A medically-

reviewed article about bipolar disorder quotes a man who resists medication treatment of his condition, saying: “The mania part is awesome. I have tons of energy and don’t want to stop.”ⁱⁱ

People with bipolar disorder want to get well. Depressive episodes are horrible and frightening. At least in moments of self-awareness, patients also know that their behavior can be terribly destructive in its manic phases. Nevertheless, a huge percentage of those who suffer resist treatment, at least in part because their desire to change is mitigated by their desire not to change. They aren’t eager to give up what they experience as the fun part of their devastating illness.

I wonder if the same isn’t true for those of us with entirely different struggles. We know that we should stop biting people’s heads off. In the moment, though, we indulge our narcissistic glee at being right and righteous. We may be acutely aware that we should address our laziness, but we sure do enjoy that down time. We want to stop lying, but all those falsehoods have facilitated our lives as we know them. Anne Fletcher and others have written an inconvenient truth about evidence-based 21st Century addiction treatment: A lifetime of never-ending hard work will be required.ⁱⁱⁱ That’s no less true of sin than it is of chronic illness.

The resistance to change goes beyond ourselves. Yes, we are eager for change in people who have harmed us and in those whose problems cost us money. But what about the people closest to us? We may fear that, while breaking unhealthy patterns of behavior, our loved ones will change in ways we neither expect nor welcome. How many resolutions to better ourselves have been sabotaged by those closest to us?

The complexity is reflected in a poem I learned at Jerusalem’s Shalom Hartman Institute this summer from Rachel Korazim, an extraordinary educator. The verse is by famed Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai:

My father was God and didn’t know it. He gave me
the Ten Commandments not in thunder and not in anger,
not in fire and not in a cloud, but gently
and with love. ...

With the Yom Kippur blessing: Honor, love, that thy days
may be long upon this earth. And the voice of my father –
white as his hair. Then he turned his face to me one last time,

as on the day he died in my arms, and said, I would like to add two more commandments:

the Eleventh Commandment, 'Thou shalt not change.'

and the Twelfth Commandment, 'Thou shalt change. You will change.'

Thus spoke my father, and he turned and walked away..."^{iv}

One of our resolutions this Yom Kippur must be to support the changes that the people in our lives resolve to make. Let us accept their apologies, with sincerity, this Yom Kippur. Let us share our plans to improve, and hear others' resolutions at this High Holy Day season; and let us ask: "How can I help you?" Let us consider, "How might I be tempted to undermine the change my dear one wants to make? Do I get something out of that current behavior? What must I give up, in order to support that *t'shuvah*, that turning in true repentance?" And remembering Amichai's father, who wanted to give his son permission to change even as he wanted him to remain the same: How might we let the people in our lives know that we love them, unconditionally, change or none?

Rabbi David Stern points to a Talmudic text that forbids us to call Abraham by the name *Avram*, the way the patriarch is first introduced.^v When Avram enters the covenant, God adds the letter *hey* to his name, making it *Avraham*. That same letter also refers to God. Rabbi Stern calls it "the *hey* of transformation." We are forbidden to foreclose the possibility that, by bringing God into our lives, each of us and the people close to us can change for the better. We must not deny that transformative opportunity to ourselves or to our loved ones.^{vi}

On this Yom Kippur, let us identify the penitential work that we must do, and let us open ourselves up even to changes that may be painful, progress that may bring collateral damage to aspects of ourselves that we like. Let us offer that same healing possibility to those who share our lives, supporting their self-improvement, even as we affirm our never-ending love for them, when they change and when they do not.

Amen.

ⁱ Rabbi David Stern, "From the President, *CCAR News*, September-October, 2018, p. 1.

ⁱⁱ Brian Krans and Valencia Higuera, "In Their Shoe: Understanding What Bipolar Disorder Feels Like," medically reviewed by Timothy J. Legg, PhD, PsyD, CRNP, ACRN, CPH on October 16, 2017, *healthline*, accessed on September 3, 2018 at <https://www.healthline.com/health/bipolar-disorder/what-bipolar-feels-like#1>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Jane E. Brody, "Effective Addiction Treatment," *The New York Times*, February 4, 2013.

^{iv} Yehuda Amichai, "My Father Was God," text provided in Hebrew with English translation by Rachel Korazim, Rabbinic Torah Seminar, Shalom Hartman Institute, Jerusalem, July 10, 2018.

^v Berachot 13a.

^{vi} Ideas presented, at least in part, by Rabbi David Stern, “Grounded in Text: Creating Impactful High Holy Day Sermons,” CCAR webinar, August 16, 2018.