

The Laws of Repentance

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Spilt milk. There's no use crying over it; that much we know. More than a drop and it's a mess. The worst spill is on the floor next to the refrigerator, awful when the milk gets under the fridge. Worse than spilt milk is spoiled milk curdling in a hard-to-reach spot. And so, as important as teaching our children there's no use crying, we bring out the rags and clean up the mess. Whose fault was the spill? Well, maybe somebody was careless; perhaps worse: someone knocked over the milk while in a fit of anger. Most often, milk is spilled by accident. Either way, somebody needs to take responsibility. The milk needs to be cleaned up.

We are frustrated when suddenly inconvenienced by a mishap of our own making. When we intended no harm, we are particularly vexed by the energy we must direct at correcting the problem, however big or small. We're tempted to leave the mess for somebody else. Who did that? Even worse, when we've done something contrary to morals or ethics, we try to distract attention from our wrongdoing. If we do eventually apologize, some say so in a round-about way or make excuses. We don't take responsibility when we say, "I'm sorry, but it's not my fault." We don't own up to our own wrongdoing when we say, "I'm sorry your feelings were hurt." We don't acknowledge our role when we say, "Mistakes were made."

As a Toyota driver, I was keenly interested a few years back, when the world's largest automaker was slow to admit failures that led to terrible accidents and wide-spread recalls. Somehow, Toyota imagined that evading responsibility would help it retain a long-held reputation for reliability. Perhaps Toyota tricked itself into believing that it couldn't possibly have produced unsafe cars. That behemoth of a corporation behaved just like you and me: We aren't eager to admit our failings.

Eventually, with no small measure of governmental prodding, Toyota admitted that it had been at fault, apologized to its customers, and went about the business of correcting the problem and struggling to repair its reputation. Admitting its error was critical to Toyota's renewal; just as confessing our wonted ways is essential to repairing our relationships, cleaning up our messiest spills.

The Holy Day season is set aside for recognizing the spilt milk in our own lives. When we hear Kol Nidre, we shall meditate on the messes we've made in the last year. God commands us to acknowledge the harm we have caused. The liturgy is specific: we must confess our wrongs, whether we committed them on purpose or accidentally. We must get busy, whether the correction is as simple as whipping out a rag or weightier than moving the refrigerator. Repair will cost us time, perhaps money, and will certainly require work.

Unfortunately, in 21st Century America, acknowledging an error is counter-cultural. We are a society that shifts blame, looking to avoid responsibility and its cost.

When we cause a car accident, many of us go to great lengths to prove it was the other guy's fault. We don't want to pay for our mistake. When our dog bites the neighbor child, we are more likely to blame the child's alleged provocations than to take responsibility for our pet. Schools are often afraid to punish student misbehavior, for fear that parents will seek to shift the blame back onto the school. Whose fault is it? Our actions speak for us: Do we apologize when we realize that we've dialed a wrong number, or do we just hang up the phone? When we inadvertently cut off another driver, do we wave to acknowledge our discourtesy, or do we conjure up reasons that the other driver made us do it? When we get charged a late fee on a bill we let slip, do we pay it or do we invent a little lie to avoid the cost?

Sadly, most of us evade responsibility. The consequence is that we don't trust one another. If we're not the cause of that car accident, or our child is the one bitten by the dog, we assume that we'll have to fight to obtain restitution and to resolve the problem to our satisfaction. And when somebody claims they didn't receive a bill we've sent, we flat out don't believe them.

Shifting the blame is wrong. It also doesn't work. The rigors of this season call us to own up to our misdeeds. We are commanded to admit our wrongs. When we "fess up," we may surprise somebody, and trust may begin to build. This year, let us change our ways for the better. When we stop shifting the blame, we will be seen as the persons of integrity we have become.

Years ago, I spent a week at Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management, in a program for rabbis and synagogue administrators. Business school taught me an important lesson about taking responsibility.

My teacher was Professor Daniel Diermeier. He asked the class what we know about Tylenol. Everyone knew the brand: Rabbis and Temple Administrators have plenty of headaches. Our strongest association with Tylenol, though, was from decades ago. Then, a criminal laced capsules with poison in a senseless, random act of murderous terror. Johnson & Johnson, Tylenol's maker, could have disavowed responsibility. After all, the company did not put cyanide in its own capsules. Its leaders and lawyers might well have been concerned about billions of dollars in lawsuits if the company did anything to suggest it was at fault. But the corporation took aggressive action nonetheless, spending millions to take every bottle of Tylenol off the shelves, everywhere.

Ultimately, of course, Tylenol returned to the market with all the safety precautions we now see on every kind of bottle. Before long, Tylenol was a bigger seller even than before. Its brand had come to bespeak trust. All these years, even decades, later, Tylenol does better in competition with its generic equivalent than every other brand-name analgesic. Showing itself to be a company that takes responsibility for its product served Tylenol well.

These High Holy Days offer us the opportunity to add a new safety cap, as it were, to ourselves. As Johnson & Johnson put tamper-resistant plastic around the top, we can seal ourselves off from shifting the blame.

As Yom Kippur approaches, let us subject ourselves to judgment. When we have caused harm, whether accidentally or with malice: Confront the mistakes. Don't shift blame. Clean up the mess.

At this season, we pray to be inscribed in the Book of Life for a good year. Much is in God's hands, and so we pray. We do control what we bring to the new year. We know that we will spill some milk. We will do harm, big and small, by accident and on purpose. Our words will hurt feelings. Our carelessness will bring harm.

This year can be different, though. Whether we miss the wastebasket or savage a family member with a toxic tongue, let us take note of our misdeeds. Let us respond with sincerity, picking up the litter and owning up to our meanness. As we do, we will begin to expect ourselves to do better next time; the people around us will trust that we know between right and wrong; God will find favor in our repentance.

I am reminded of a children's story told by Rabbi Jonathan Kraus. Adam and Eve are wracking their brains trying to come up with a gift for the world's first birthday. Neither can think of anything. Finally, Eve has an idea: "We'll give the world a necktie." Adam responds harshly. The proposal is ridiculous, even foolish. The world doesn't need a necktie. Eve realizes that he's right, but her feelings are hurt. Did Adam have to be so rude? Realizing how he has hurt his wife, Adam apologizes with sincerity. He acknowledges the pain he has caused. He resolves to be more sensitive in the future. Eve accepts his contrition with gratitude.

Just then, a heavenly voice rings out: Adam's apology is the best gift the world could receive. Like Eve, God accepts the apology.

Amen.