

Al Chet Shechatanu

COLLECTIVELY WE OWN THEM ALL

Rabbi Daniel G. Zemel

We are a society that shies away from the use of the word “sin.” We leave the word to such figures as colonialist preacher Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758), whose sermons (such as “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God”) have been made famous by history. We content ourselves instead with “mistakes” and “errors.” Even when human lives are lost, families torn apart, and countries destroyed because we went to war over false intelligence, misinformation, and disinformation, we prefer terms like “policy misjudgment” or “misguided decision.” No one sins anymore.

No one even thinks about sin—except for one season of the year when we take the *machzor* off the shelf and discover there a litany of sins that indicts and includes each one of us. We rediscover, as if for the first time, that we actually have committed sins—a multitude of them, in fact—all in just the past twelve months; and the list is formidable—arrogance, contempt, deceit, violence, neglect, and lust, to name but a few.

This, according to the *machzor* anyhow, is not just what we do, but who we are, because we never seem to change. Year after year, there we are again, the same list before us. Haven’t we learned anything? Have people been like this forever? Despite evolution, history, and eons of education, is this our eternal lot? Is this not a challenge to faith itself? If we are who we are and who we are does not change, what is the point of the entire exercise?

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In one of my favorite movies, *Hoosiers*, one of the main characters, Myra Fleener, says admiringly about her home community and what brought her to return to it, “Nothing ever changes. People don’t change.” In the context of the movie, the words are consoling; they convey the hometown warmth and security that Myra loves. Predictability can be comforting.

Each year as I consider the High Holy Day litany of sins, I find myself thinking about Myra’s wisdom and wondering about the extent of their truth. Myra Fleener’s words are well worth thinking about.

So, too, is one of the most telling stories in Genesis regarding the human ability to change: the metamorphosis of Jacob into Israel. After twenty years of separation, and on the eve (finally) of reuniting with his twin brother, Esau, the manipulative, scheming Jacob wrestles with an apparition, an angel. As dawn breaks, the angel releases Jacob from his grip and renames him “Israel”—“one who struggles” (Genesis 32:29). But Jacob has been injured and, as Israel now, must leave the scene limping. Change, it seems, is birthed in struggle and hurt. Redemption from sin comes only after time, effort, and pain.

But then my friend Myra Fleener comes back to haunt me. “People don’t change,” she insists. Indeed, Myra could have gotten this from Torah itself, because no sooner do we turn the page on this very name-changing wrestling match than we see the Torah referring to Jacob again—yes, Jacob, not Israel. This insistence that it is Jacob continues for several chapters; it is no anomaly. Not until Genesis 37:3 does our ancestor reappear as Israel—and only in a mocking, even sarcastic, reference to the very same flawed character we have been reading about since the younger Jacob cheated Esau: “Israel loved Joseph more than all his children.” The father in us all wants to shout out to Jacob/Israel, “Haven’t you learned anything at all, all these years?”

Call him Jacob—call him Israel. Call him what you like. There has been no change. Jacob/Israel is the same rascal. Just as he manipulated his father Isaac to play favorites, so he now plays favorites himself, giving a gift to his favored son, while the others go off to work in the field.

How can we understand this failure to change even by the patriarch who gives us his name, “Israel”? Isn’t Judaism rooted in the fundamental idea that people can change, grow, and become better? Why else have it? If we find ourselves confessing the very same sins every year, how do we avoid the conclusion that we have not grown and cannot grow at all?

But take away the premise that change is possible, and what is left of the entire High Holy Day enterprise?

Perhaps, then, we must insist on change but recognize also that change is even harder than we thought. Like Jacob's wrestling match, it sends us all away limping—but genuine confession is a multiyear process, not a onetime wrestling match. We say these words year after year, throughout our lives, and yes, we change; but not in the course of a single Yom Kippur day, not even in the course of a single year, and (as far as human progress overall is concerned) not in the course of a single life.

Change must be measured cumulatively. What is the impact of confessing our sins not just once but five times every Yom Kippur, and then doing so again, year after year after year? What is the impact on an entire people doing this for centuries? What is the cumulative effect of such a confession on our people's march through history?

Change occurs only over the long haul, and the *machzor* offers not a magic bullet but an invitation for that long haul; and here we come to that pesky but critical reminder that the confession of sins, the *Vidui*, is couched in the plural—"For the sin *we* have sinned." We need the "we" because change occurs cumulatively over the entire chain of people who constitute the centuries; each Yom Kippur, each of us is part of this historical "we," the Jewish People that we call our own, and the human family of which the Jewish People is a part.

We may open the prayer book as individuals, but we read it as part of an eternal people. We should remind ourselves that the very notion of an individual self is a modern one and not entirely accurate. The ancients, our forebears, thought as part of a collective. *I* may have been deceitful and dishonest. *Someone else* was arrogant and devious; *a third* was aggressive and self-serving.

Collectively, we own them all. *Kol yisrael arevim zeh lazeh*, "All Israel is responsible for one another"—we take communal ownership of all our sins.

In his wonderfully challenging book *The Ethics of Memory*, Avishai Margalit distinguishes ethics from morals on the grounds that ethics connotes the responsibility we naturally feel for members of our family or tribe, while morality is our obligation for the world. We feel a particular bond (and with it, a deeper obligation) with those whose memories we share, those whose experiences are our own, but we dare not ignore the universal demands that link us to the world. As a Jew gathered with other

Jews on Yom Kippur, I seek change within my people—that is my ethical obligation. But I know my moral responsibility, too—my part in the moral betterment of all humankind. As descendants of Jacob/Israel, we know how difficult it is to change. We arrange an annual opportunity to try it anyway, knowing that at best we can take but a small step forward in the larger human evolution to being better—some day.

This understanding lifts me up as I prepare to enter the drama of Yom Kippur. I am not here only for myself. I am here for the entire community of those descendants of Israel whose destiny I share. And I am here, through Israel, for the larger human journey of us all. Knowing how hard change is, I join recognition of my failures to the failure of others—the person sitting next to me, perhaps, who cares equally for me. Contrary to popular expectation, change is impossible for me alone. It comes about only through the supporting mutuality of a community. *Tovim hashmayim min ha'echad*, “Two is better than one” (Ecclesiastes 4:9); or in a more contemporary metaphor, “It takes a village.”

Hoosier's fictitious Myra Fleener of Hickory, Indiana, was right to say that “people don't change”—not when they live as isolates, and the Hickory that is depicted early in the movie is mean-spirited and vindictive, distrustful of outsiders, ready to pounce on mistakes, and unable to forgive past sins. Redemption in the film arrives through soul searching, public honesty, confession, prayer, and (finally) a town pulling together because they are winners “no matter what the scoreboard says at the end.” A very Jewish movie formula.

Throughout his life, Jacob remains Jacob, the name change to Israel notwithstanding. Only at the end of Genesis is his lesson learned, and only by his sons, who finally discover the honesty necessary to reveal their true selves to each other and, in the process, offer support to one another. This is the gift of public confession in community. Overall growth and change may not happen in our own lifetime; meanwhile, we expose our failing publicly and offer support in our wrestling match with history.

