

Can we rationalists be judged by God?
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G'mar Chatimah Tovah! May all of us be inscribed for a good year to come.

Thank you for showing up!

The great Jewish sage Woody Allen noted that "Ninety percent of life is just showing up." So thank you, and know that we have succeeded just by being here. You receive an easy "A minus".

But what have we shown up for? Why have we come together today?

We come together in large part to confess our sins. We detail them at great length. We have sinned against ourselves and each other, against friends and family, and we have sinned against strangers. We have not done right by Jewish teachings and by the world.

Identifying all of these sins leaves us with a long list. Yet what do we really mean by sin?

One of the main words we use for sin is *cheit*, a term in archery from ancient Israel. To have committed a *cheit* means that we have missed the mark. We tried to do right and hit the bull's eye, and we were not successful.

This alone offers us a teaching of forgiveness. How much easier our apologies when we admit to ourselves, and to each other, that we really were aiming in the right direction, and we were off a little. Next time we might get it right. When we forgive ourselves, and each other, we offer up the possibility of picking up the bow again, taking aim, and working to do better.

When we promise to try and aim more accurately, we begin to make amends.

Easier said than done perhaps. Going back over all those moments when we missed the mark seems like an enormous and painful task. What can we really do on this single day to correct our aim, to repent and then get it right in the future? What role does God play in judging our lives?

While I hope to answer these questions from a Reform perspective, first I share with you a story of a powerful experience I had with repentance, oddly enough from the midst of one of the most Orthodox communities in the world.

Many of you have already met Ginny, and more of you have heard about her from me. We lived in an interesting neighborhood in Jerusalem for a year and half between 1997 and 1998. We were students, had very little money, were looking for a place that was convenient to the center of Jerusalem and to the University, and knew very little about this particular place before we moved in. The neighborhood was wedged between Arab Jerusalem to the East and Meah Shearim, the ultra-orthodox enclave to the West. We lived amidst the super-religious and I was one of the only men who didn't wear huge fur streimels, those big fur hats that look like UFO's, and silk overcoats on Shabbat, and Ginny was one of the only women who didn't wear ankle length dresses and shapeless shmatas to cover our hair.

Ginny and I were young and very secular by most Israeli standards. I was a non-orthodox rabbinical student with a ponytail, and Ginny was a scantily young woman - she even dared to wear short sleeved t-shirts and pants and never covered her hair! That's right, she showed off her wrists and ankles! And we had a dog. Many ultra-orthodox frown on dogs as unclean. We clearly didn't follow the right rules, and on top of that, we were an obvious bad influence on their children. I even rode a bicycle on Shabbat!

Our ultra-orthodox neighbors were hostile to us as soon as we moved in. They yelled at us when we went out on Shabbat. Their children threw stones and trash at our dog when we walked her. They viewed our presence as a total violation of their teachings.

Then, almost ten months after we moved in, things suddenly changed. Children stopped yelling at us, women hanging out their laundry stopped berating us, and the attacks on our dog ceased altogether. We soon learned of the reason. We heard that on Simchat Torah, in the synagogue nearest to us, while dancing around with the holiest object in our tradition, someone in this ultra-orthodox community had dropped a Torah.

Many of you know what a big deal that is. Our congregants of every age fear holding the Torah for precisely this reason. Tradition teaches that dropping the Torah is such an offense, that every adult present when one is dropped must fast for forty days. The rabbis of the Talmud explain that this means only days, not nights as well, so that means a forty day fast every day from sunrise to sundown. (Something better done during winter's shorter days, obviously.)

For this ultra-religious community, a dropped Torah was a call to repentance of the greatest seriousness. They understood that dropping a Torah on Simchat Torah, the day that celebrates the Torah itself, meant that they must undertake a fundamental reform of their ways.

As it turned out, one of their communal commitments to change was in their interaction with us. These ultra-orthodox Jews recognized where they had missed the mark in their treatment of us, who were the strangers in their midst. They changed their ways.

Here is an Orthodox view of our God as judge. These traditionalists from Meah Sharim understood that dropping the Torah on one of God's holiest days of the year was God's harsh judgment upon them. They take literally the language of our shared prayers. They embrace as real, the metaphorical God of Yom Kippur who judges our every action. They traced the source of their trouble to this arbiter on high. The God of Sinai had punished them through one of their own dropping the Torah and they were sentenced to repent, atone, and make amends.

Fundamentalist Jews of this sort often embrace a very simple idea about God. God punishes us directly for breaking God's rules. God forgives us directly when we repent, granting us atonement, and allowing us to do better in the year to come.

As Twenty-First Century Reform Jews we have a different view of God the judge. We are not satisfied with a simple notion of reward and punishment. When one asks "Why do bad things happen to good people?" we seek more profound answers than God's punishment of our wrongs.

As Liberal Jews, we are not literalist or fundamentalist or orthodox. We take our Torah very seriously. We learn from it great and profound teachings. Still we admit that it may not be literally or historically accurate. Most of us connect to a more abstract idea of God - a deep mystery at the center of the universe that doesn't point a finger down and make people drop a Torah in order to teach them a lesson. While dropping a Torah might be an opportunity to learn something, we wouldn't attribute it to God's direct interference in our lives.

In designing our ark, we worked so hard to make sure the Torahs wouldn't fall, they almost get stuck inside. We wanted to make sure that we, and not God, protected the Torah.

In our Reform view of the world, a relationship in crisis awakens us to our failures in the same way a dropped Torah does. Yom Kippur is our annual checkup to prevent relationships from reaching a point of no return. Just as we don't want to drop the Torah, we don't want our relationships to break. Yom Kippur serves as a preventive measure allowing us to take note of what we may have missed through denial and oversight. Yom Kippur helps us protect against our behavior going unchecked in the way our ark protects our Torahs from physical accidents.

At the heart of Yom Kippur is our confessional:

For transgressions against God, the Day of Atonement Atones; but for transgressions of one human being against another, the Day of Atonement does not atone until they have made peace with another.

What are transgressions against God?

The Orthodox in Meah Shearim view their relationship with God as a quid pro quo – whether they forget to recite the blessing after going to the bathroom or steal from their neighbor, both violate God’s law rather than human relationships and earn Divine punishment.

As modern and thoughtful Jews we hold a different view. We can easily understand making amends with each other. When we ask for forgiveness we do so because we have wronged someone. What could we rationalists, we reasonable Reform Jews have ever done to hurt the creator of the universe? Without an awareness of the transgression, how can we repent, make amends, and receive forgiveness?

Albert Einstein said: “I believe in God who reveals himself in the orderly harmony of what exists, not in a God who concerns himself with the fates and actions of human beings.”

Einstein’s belief neatly sums up Reform thinking about God. We inherited ideas from Nineteenth Century Reform theologians that taught that creation itself asks us to be moral and ethical. The teachings of Judaism form a rational framework for good behavior and the building of a better society.

Even as a follower of such sound thinking, I dare to take a Jewish leap of faith.

When we honor the God of creation, we act in a way that preserves, perpetuates and creates more life. We sin against God the creator when we destroy life, or tear down structures that maintain life and contribute to betterment of all.

We sin against God the creator when we hurt each other, or allow hurt to come to one another by our inactions.

We sin against God the creator when we refuse to build a more just society in which people are taken care of because we see everyone as part of creation.

The preservation of living breathing humans, takes precedence over all commandments - we can break almost any other rule for the sake of saving each others’ lives, which are the outcome of creation.

As Reform Jews, we face judgement when we fail to be worthy partners with God in completing creation. Our judgment comes upon us when our environmental failures cause cancers and ruin the world for living things. Our judgement comes upon us when we allow anyone to go without housing, healing, or food.

As Reform Jews, we find forgiveness when we solve our *cheit*, our aim that has gone astray - when we bring ourselves back in line with the direction of creation.

When we offer up our confessions, we do so as a community that yearns to come back together and do better, create better, in the year to come. We admit many more transgressions than we possibly could have committed alone, or even all together, in the hope that by so doing we create better aim for us all. We pull our bow back all together with eyes set in the same direction. Our forgiveness comes out of our sense of being in it together, as sinners who strive to do better.

We missed the mark in the year gone by. We yearn to aim better and make it right. Just as the Orthodox of Meah Shearim appealed to God's mercy by fixing their ways and becoming civil to Ginny and me, so we appeal to the God in each other for mercy for not doing better and commit to each other to make improvements in the future.

The God from whom we seek repentance is the God of creation present in all of us and all the world. God's judgment, our fate, is in our own hands.

God will not save us from hurricanes, a community that builds shelters and levees and hospitals and has resources for each other will.

God will not save us from cancer and terrible diseases, but facing life threatening illnesses with others makes them less horrific. Building a society that seeks out ways to treat and cure illness, to improve our health and well-being, saves lives, and gives us hope.

God will not save us from others who wish to do us harm. We protect ourselves when we take steps to build a world where fewer and fewer people are so desperate. When we create more options for more of us, when we educate all children, we foster a culture that resists resorting to violence.

God will not save us from our own neglect of our environment or our communities. Only when we come together and stand with moral courage will we align ourselves towards collective salvation.

Unlike the Jews of Meah Shearim, we do this righteous work for no reward - we do it because we believe that the universe arcs towards creation, because God prefers creation. The reward is in the deed itself. The deed brings God nearer to us and us nearer to God.

We must check in with each other, we must engage each other, and we must forgive ourselves for not doing better until now.

We must follow the words of Rabbi Woody Allen and show up, but more than that we must show up to confess and then show up for each other as we improve our aim towards a better future.

We must forgive God for not placing us in a better world, and demand from each other that we build that better world together.

So now I ask us to consider God, that space between people. When we seek forgiveness from God, let us turn, do our repentance, and find the strength to mend relationships. When we seek blessing, strength and righteousness, let us start with the bonds between people, and bring God into them.

When we have taken care of our end of the equation, of our side of the covenant, then we find that we have filled the world with God, and it is not God who will inscribe us but we who will inscribe ourselves for a Good New Year.