

Recalibrate

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Sanctuary Services

Rabbi Laura Geller

We could all go home now. The drama is over. We already know how this day will end.

Hi. My name is Laura and I'm a perfectionist.

But I'm not perfect. There are things I've done that make me feel bad, guilty, ashamed, like a sinner. But I'm not alone. It's okay to pray with me, and for me to pray with you. I want to start this new year whole again – without the heaviness of last year's failures. I want to feel forgiven.

We just sang these words: “Knowingly or not, the whole community of Israel has sinned—let them be forgiven.”

God answers: “ויאמר הי סלחתי כדברייך I have forgiven you as you have asked.”

We are already forgiven. End of story. So why don't the gates close now?

Because forgiveness from God is what opens the gates. The question now is: can we forgive ourselves?

Just this week I got an e-mail from a woman named Naomi:

“Dear Rabbi Geller, Over the years, there are things that I have done to other people that hurt them. For one reason or another, I have not made amends for these sins. I try to do my best in this area, but I'm not perfect. I feel guilty that I haven't made amends and even more guilty because I know that therefore God won't forgive me. How do people deal with that type of guilt?”

I wrote her back: “You are already forgiven by God. You don't have to be perfect. That's what Yom Kippur is about. There is no original sin and no cosmic guilt. And because we start Yom Kippur knowing we are already forgiven by God, it is safe to do the work we need to do to figure out how we might make amends, and then how we can forgive ourselves. That's why we don't go home yet. That's why we spend the next twenty-four hours doing the work of *teshuvah*, confessing our sins, confronting our shortcomings, acknowledging our imperfections.”

“For the sin we have committed against you by hardening our hearts...

“And for the sins we have committed against you by hurting others in any way...

“For the sins we have committed against you by fraud and falsehood...”

The list goes on. We speak all this out loud; we beat our chests. We are far from perfect. But even with all this, even with all the ways we have fallen short, we are already forgiven by God.

But, like Naomi, we are often our harshest critics. We are sometimes harder on ourselves than others ever could be. We often carry guilt or remorse or self-recriminations far disproportionate to the action that provoked those feelings and long after whatever it was has been forgotten by everyone else.

We strive for perfection, and beat ourselves up when we fall short. But we don't need to be perfect. The pressure to be perfect gets in the way of spiritual growth. In a new book called *The Pursuit of Perfect*, Professor Tal ben Shachar, the popular Harvard psychology professor, argues that perfectionism also gets in the way of happiness. He describes the connection between our striving to be perfect and many of the problems we experience in our own families: eating disorders, depression, anxiety, the pressure so many of our children feel to get into the best colleges only to crash when they finally reach the college of their dreams. In spite of this, many of us believe that it is our drive toward perfection that makes us successful. We have high standards for other people and for ourselves. Falling short is not an option. We regard it as failure. From this place it is hard to forgive ourselves.

I know this, because in so many ways, Ben Shachar is describing me. After every service at temple, I go over and over it. (My husband says obsessively.) How could my teaching be better, was the music as good as it could be, why was that congregant in the fourth row looking bored? I get angry over each typo or misspelled name in *Temple Topics*. I am harsh on myself, and therefore on others, because I believe that perfection is possible, that errors are avoidable, that to be less than perfect is... unforgiveable. So when I stumble, make mistakes, or fall short of my standards, it is hard to forgive myself. Perfectionism comes with a heavy cost.

Ben Shachar proposes an alternative to perfectionism which he calls *optimalism*. The challenge, he argues, is to focus on what is optimal, good but not perfect. There is no perfect life, no perfect marriage, no perfect children or grandchildren (sorry, mom!), no perfectly flat belly or perfectly unwrinkled face.

Of course we need to have high expectations, to try to do the best we can. But we need to admit that failure is an inevitable part of the journey. Going off course is not always a negative thing; it can be an opportunity for receiving feedback and learning from it. It is like the voice in the GPS that responds to a wrong turn with the word *recalibrating*. In our life, we get lost. We make a wrong

turn. We get stuck in a horrible traffic jam. Our challenge is to learn from those mistakes and to recalibrate the journey.

We need to recalibrate, and to forgive ourselves for not being perfect.

Rabbi Harold Kushner suggests that the most important word in Torah is in Genesis when God says to Abraham: “Walk before me and be *tamim*.” How you translate *tamim* makes all the difference. The Christian King James Bible renders the meaning: “be perfect.” Some Jewish translations read it as: “be unblemished.” Rabbi Kushner argues that both of those are misguided, because they imply that God expects perfection.

So what does God expect of us? What does *tamim* mean? The new Women’s Torah Commentary translates it as “pure of heart.” Even better, in my view, is Everett Fox’s translation: “Walk in my presence. And be wholehearted.”

The challenge is not to be perfect; that’s impossible. The challenge is to be wholehearted. Or maybe even openhearted.

What does it mean to have open heart? Torah speaks about it graphically, using the metaphor of a circumcised heart. “Circumcise your hearts,” Moses tells us... and befriend the stranger for you were strangers in Egypt.” And in the Torah portion for tomorrow morning we read: “God will circumcise your heart in order that you may live...”

I know this is a problematic image, but the idea that you have to have a circumcised heart in order to really live is very moving to me. Particularly on Yom Kippur. The image of a heart that is covered over is a heart that doesn’t allow pain and can’t empathize with other hurting hearts. Circumcising your heart begins with you. You have to notice when your heart is closed and confess to your hard-heartedness. You start the process, and then God helps transform your vulnerability and your imperfection to compassion, compassion for others and compassion for yourself. Only then are you really alive.

Compassion leads to forgiveness. Forgiveness doesn’t mean that whatever happened was okay. Forgiveness doesn’t mean that everything returns to where it was. Forgiveness doesn’t mean there are no consequences to our actions.

Forgiveness only means that the power of whatever happened no longer keeps your heart from being open.

When you have an open heart, you let yourself feel pain when life isn’t perfect, when things don’t turn out the way you planned. And of course, they never do. Loss, illness, divorce, disappointment, failure, none of us are perfect. Can you forgive yourself for that?

An open heart lets you say what my teacher Sylvia Boorstein suggests when you are having trouble forgiving yourself: “Sweetheart, you are in pain. Relax. Take a breath. Let’s pay attention to what is happening. Then we’ll figure out what to do.”

“Sweetheart,” I say to myself. “Sweet open heart. Relax. Breathe. Pay attention to the feeling of distress. Don’t be mad at the feeling. Don’t be so critical. You don’t have to be perfect. Forgive yourself. Now let’s learn from whatever happened. Recalibrate.”

We are already forgiven by God for not being perfect. Now we have to do the work that will allow us to forgive ourselves.

So don’t go home yet. Stay for the service. Come back tomorrow. This synagogue is a safe place to do the work. It is filled with people like Naomi who sent that e-mail, imperfect people who still want to try to do their best. It is safe because you already know how the day will end – with you, tired and hungry, having wrestled with what you need to do to repair what is broken, to pull together what is fragmented, to become whole again.

Whole, but not perfect. Wholehearted and forgiven. Forgiven, we can look forward to a future not controlled by the mistakes of the past. Forgiven, we can recalibrate our journey.

Listen for God’s response reverberating inside the GPS of your open heart: “סלחתי כדברידך” And God said: I have forgiven you.”

So now you can forgive yourself.