

## IMPATIENCE

If you come to the family service tomorrow, you will hear this phrase: “If I were to ask you ‘what is the holiest day of the year,’ you would answer ‘Yom Kippur is the holiest day of the year,’ and you’d be right.”

This is what we’ve been saying for years – Yom Kippur is the holiest day of the year. It’s probably true. It’s certainly true that most Jews – and non-Jews as well – consider it the holiest day in the Jewish calendar. But more and more, I’ve started to have my doubts. It isn’t that I don’t think Yom Kippur is a very important day. I just wonder if it’s the holiest.

Yom Kippur is of course translated as the Day of Atonement. In religious terms, to atone is to affect reconciliation between a person and God. In everyday usage, to atone is to repair a wrong, to make amends. It is not just apologizing and seeking forgiveness.

It’s an action taken to put things back the way they were as best you can, or, if that’s not possible, to offer some form of compensation. It is an attempt at mending a breach. It has been pointed out that the word “atone” can be split into two words – “at one.” When one person makes atonement with another, he is trying to repair the rift between them, so that in their relationship they are again “at one” with each other.

So why do I think that the Day of Atonement might not be the holiest day of all? Simply because the actions I just described can’t be done in just one day. And they certainly can’t be done if we’re spending that day here, in prayer, talking to God, rather than going around to the people we’ve hurt and actually atoning.

So it isn’t that I don’t think Yom Kippur is a very important day. It’s just that more and more I’m seeing it not as a day unto itself, but rather as the culmination,

the confirmation, the celebration of all the personal work we've been doing – or should have been doing – over the past 40 days, from the beginning of Elul until this very moment.

Yom Kippur is like graduation day – the family all comes together, everyone dresses up, you need tickets to get into the ceremony. There isn't enough parking, and when you finally do get in, you all sit on folding chairs in a big room listening to a lot of talking. Finally, at the end of the day, you get your diploma confirming your accomplishment, and then – you and your family go and eat. Graduation day is a great day, an important day: but the work that got you there happened in the weeks and months and years leading up to that day. You don't get a diploma just for attending graduation. You don't get atonement just by showing up to Kol Nidre.

One attempt to fix this is the *selichot* board in the lobby. Many of you have participated. If you haven't had a chance to see it, I encourage you to take a look tonight or tomorrow. The idea of the board is to put into practice what I've been saying for years – what every rabbi has been saying for years – that self-evaluation and apology and atonement is a process that takes more than just one day. If you're going to do it right, you have to start before Yom Kippur arrives. And thus, the *selichot* board: encouragement to begin early to name the things for which we will seek atonement.

I have been amazed and astonished – and deeply moved – by some of the things that you have been willing to share on this board. Anonymously, it's true, but even so, it takes courage to be able to admit some of these things to ourselves, more courage to commit them to writing and even more courage than that to put them in the box and know that others will read them. I will share some of them tomorrow during our reading of the confession of sins.

Tonight, I want to share with you something that I didn't expect. Many of the more than 100 plaques that were returned fell into just two categories. In response to what they wished to be forgiven for, most of the children wrote things like, "for being mean to my brother" or for "hitting my sister," or "for not listening to my parents." It's actually kind of comforting that these are the worst actions our kids are worried about. And I guess this is exactly what you'd expect from kids – much of their world still revolves around family, they have the most interactions with family and they are the most comfortable with family – so it makes sense that most of their mistakes will involve family. That's the kids.

The adult responses were a bit more varied, but far and away the number one sin in this mini-survey was impatience. A few said impatience with co-workers, more said impatience with a spouse, and overwhelmingly, you asked to be forgiven for impatience with your kids. A question and a sermon for another time is what is it about our lifestyle that is making so many of us so impatient with those we love. But that's for another time. Tonight I want to address what we can do about it.

The good news is that we realize it. The bad news is that realizing it hasn't, for the most part made any difference. We tell ourselves that next time we will be patient, and then next time arrives, and the same interaction occurs. We make vows and promises to ourselves about how we will behave, and then we break them. Kol Nidre – for the vows I am unable to fulfill, forgive me.

In *mussar*, Jewish spiritual ethics, impatience is not a trait. Impatience is a symptom of a deficiency in the character trait of patience. The goal therefore is not to stamp out impatience, but instead to work on strengthening our ability to be patient. It isn't just semantics. If you are physically weak, you don't say "I'm going to stamp out my weakness," you say "I'm going to build up my strength." It's by building up the positive that we minimize the negative, not the other way around.

So how do we build up our patience muscles in general, and more specifically with the people in our lives? One way to begin might be to notice when and where you lack patience. For some people, it's everywhere. But for many of us, it's in specific situations.

I've shared before that I am a very impatient driver. I think it's by far my worst trait. Others may disagree... I have tried over the years to get better. I have tried to be more patient. And I have failed. I think I've failed because I have not been able to identify the reason for my impatience. Why does bad driving bother me so much? It's not really delaying me that much. And yet I can become irate. Why is that? Just last week, I found a brief quote which stunned me in its simplicity, and which I believe is going to be of great help. It's from the book, **Where'd You Go, Bernadette**, by Maria Semple. She writes, "The drivers here are horrible. And by horrible, I mean they don't realize I have someplace to be."

That's it! I lose patience not because they are particularly bad drivers, but because their perceived ineptitude is affecting me. Alan Morinis, author of **Everyday Holiness**, writes, "The situations in which we can feel impatience are numberless, but there is one common factor that unites them all. We only burn with that particular fire when the focus in the situation is on *me*. You are delaying *me*, misleading *me*, berating *me*. You are interfering with *my* plan or standing in the way of *my* needs. We all tend to see ourselves as the prime actor in a drama that swirls around us."

It's all about us. Think about those moments of impatience you feel, with a co-worker, a spouse, a parent or a child. The sudden rage. What is it really about? If Morinis is right, it isn't about the mistakes in the important document, or the failure to pick up the dry-cleaning, or the mess on the kitchen counter. It's about how those things affect us, how they make us feel.

And these things can and do affect us. Your mistakes in the document may delay my ability to finish my part of the job; your not getting the dry-cleaning may mean I can't wear my favorite suit tomorrow; your making a mess in the kitchen means dinner will be late. These things do affect us, no question about it. The question is, now that I am affected, how will I respond? Because this is where the real damage takes place.

As bad as it is for me to do it, when I'm fuming in my car, the other drivers can't hear me, so they are completely unaffected by what I say. All it does is raise my blood pressure. In almost every other setting, however, our impatience directly impacts the people we're dealing with. Impatience becomes the smallest part of the problem.

Alan Morinis again: "The problem with impatience is that it usually takes only a split second for its first glowing embers to ignite into flames [of anger] that course through us even before we become aware that they have started up. Impatience snuffs out consciousness, and before I even know it's happening, I'm leaning on my horn, or you're going hoarse yelling at your child, or at your spouse, or at the postman. At this point we don't even recognize ourselves, and there is little to be done but to try to reign in these feelings enough to minimize any damage we might do."

And we do damage. The hurtful things we say when our impatience gives way to anger don't go away, even when we apologize. Words once heard cannot be unheard. Their memory colors the next interaction, and the one after that. If it happens repeatedly, people start expecting your impatience to explode into anger, start fearing what will happen, start avoiding interaction. Impatience – even justified impatience – which leads to anger, damages relationships.

We don't want to be impatient and angry. But why won't my co-worker just be more careful? Why won't my spouse remember things? Why won't my kids be more thoughtful?

All fair questions. *Mussar* teaches that “When you find yourself in a situation that is triggering your impatience, instead of giving all your attention and energy to finding fault with the person who is so clearly at fault, you can choose to be patient and to take responsibility for your emotional response to that situation.” Yes, someone did something that negatively impacts you. You could not control that. But now you get to make the choice of whether to give in to your anger, or to summon your patience to help you bear the burden of the situation. As Viktor Frankl said, there is always a choice – the choice of how to respond. We have to be aware of what's going on, and then we get to make a choice- back off, or explode. This awareness and exercise of choice is sometimes referred to as “increasing the space between the match and the fuse.”

This is not an ability that we develop overnight. It takes practice. Alan Morinis says, “Being able to call on patience in [this way] depends on having [already] cultivated your awareness of the telltale signs of impatience so you can spot them right in the instant that they begin to stir. The practice is to witness and name the feelings just as they come up, which requires that you say to yourself, “I'm feeling impatient” or “there's impatience again.” Just by forming those words, you are holding open at least a tiny crack through which the light of consciousness can still shine, and if you can do that, then at that point what was going to happen in that moment of impatience is suddenly no longer so certain.”

That's actually all it is. It's simple, but it is definitely not easy. The more you do it, the stronger your patience muscle gets. Recognizing that you're becoming impatient, naming it, and choosing how to respond, rather than reacting mindlessly.

Patience doesn't mean that we become passive. It doesn't mean that we should put up with anything that others do which affect us. It doesn't mean that we never get angry. It does mean that we don't need to react to every delay or deflection as if it were a denial of who we are. It affects us, yes, but it may not all be about us. Morinis closes his discussion on the topic this way: "In those moments when I am good at being patient, I live in the here and the now, without straining against reality. I walk a middle path, not leaning to the one extreme of being inactive and fatalistic nor veering to the other, where impatience reigns."

Living in the here and now. I shared at the beginning that the word "atone" can be divided into the phrase, "at one." Here's one more word-play like that. In her book, **When the Heart Waits**, Sue Monk Kidd writes, "Someone brought to my attention that the words "nowhere" and "now here" have the same arrangement of letters; the letters are merely separated by a small space in the latter phrase. Likewise, a fine space separates us from experiencing life as 'nowhere' or 'now here'." I would add that this "fine space" is the same space we need to open to separate the match and the fuse. When we allow impatience to flare into anger, our relationships go nowhere. But if in that moment of choice we can learn to just take a breath, if we can pay attention to what is really happening right now, here, we will have mastered our impatience, and our relationships will thrive. Ken Yehi Ratzon.