Three Little Words…

By

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*The ability to atone has always been the most remarkable of human features*

- Leon Uris

Consider the very first children born to a woman; the first to ever to walk the earth, the sons of Adam and Eve. Cain and Abel. We know so little about them really. Abel was a keeper of sheep, a shepherd. Cain was a tiller of the soil, a farmer. When they brought offerings to the Lord, the Lord favored Abel’s. Crestfallen, Cain sulked. The Lord took note of his distress and sought to encourage him. “Surely if you do right, there is uplift. But if you do not do right, sin crouches at the door… yet you can be its master.”

We know Cain did not “do right.” He was anything but the master of sin. He murdered his brother. When God then inquires, “Where is Abel?” Cain replies, “Why are you asking me? Am I my brother’s keeper?”

The Midrash enlarges the narrative, having Cain demanding of God, “Why are you having this conversation with me? You are the protector of life, and yet You are asking me?” As if his disrespect were not enough, he goes on to *blame* God for his terrible act. “Yes, I killed him, but it is You who gave me the evil inclination; it is You who is supposed to protect all mankind and You let me kill him… no, *You* killed him. Had you accepted my offering like his, this would never have happened…”

It was you. Not me. It is not my fault.

These words, in various forms, echo through history, through events large and small, public and private, each time multiplying and deepening the hurt and harm of the initial wrong.

“This mitzvah that I command you today, it is not hidden from you and it is not distant. It is not in heaven, [for you] to say, ‘who can ascend to the heaven, and take it for us, so that we can listen to it and perform it?”  (Devarim 30:11)

Ramban teaches that the mitzvah referred to here is the *teshuvah* (repentance), that in these words, the Torah is telling us that to repent is not beyond us. We can do it. The ability is right… there.

And yet, if as the great baalei mussar ask, teshuva is so accessible then why do we have such a difficult time doing it? Why do people not constantly take advantage of this very “reachable” mitzvah? Why do we not immediately and fully own up to our mistakes?

Why do we, like Cain, seem to choke on the simple words, I am sorry? Why do we hide, lie, and cheat all to avoid admitting to the fundamental human reality that we are human; we make mistakes; we do wrong?

We can identify Cain’s horrible sin. We can assign blame to him. But we are no better than him in accepting our own fault for our own mistakes and wrongdoing. We spend a lifetime blaming others – our siblings, our parents, our in-laws, our teachers, our spouses, anyone other than ourselves.

We read *Parashat Nitzvaim* just before Rosh Hashanah, when the full onus of our own shortcomings should weigh heaviest upon us; when we are most burdened by our sin when we need to know that relief from that burden is not distant, is not up in the heavens, but it is attainable and within our grasp. *Teshuvah* is less than an arm’s length away *if* we are willing to reach for it. *Teshuvah* is close by if we are willing to own up to our responsibility.

If we do not take advantage of that attainable mitzvah, our burden will continue to weigh on us, growing heavier and heavier each minute of each hour of each day. Until we admit our mistakes, failings and shortcomings, our lives will not, cannot change.

Without *teshuvah* we are weighted by the heaviness of our humanness rather than lifted by the forgiveness God promises.

Cain’s sin was murder, but his punishment was exacted for his refusal to take responsibility for his terrible action. So too Adam in the Garden. Yes, he transgressed *the one and only directive* God imposed on his life in Eden. But it wasn’t for *that alone* that he is banished. After Adam and Eve have eaten of the Tree, God doesn’t simply punish them. No, God gives them a chance to repent; to take responsibility for their failing.

He doesn’t. He blames Eve. “The woman whom You gave to be with me – *she* gave me of the tree and I ate.” It isn’t my fault. It’s her fault. And Yours. “The woman whom *You* gave to be with me.”

*Chava* behaved no better. It was not me, it was the *nachash*, the serpent. “…the serpent deceived me, and I ate…

Only then, after both Adam and *Chava* sinned *and refused to take responsibility for their sin* were they punished.

Our liturgy makes clear that God understands too well our human weakness. We repeat Ki lo tachpotz b’mos ha’meis, ki im b’shuvo v’achaya (God does not want the death of the sinner, but rather in his return, *teshuvah*). We are human. As the poet teaches, “to err is human.” Our sin, our error, our failure is inevitable. It is the “admission price” for living. “There is no righteous man who will do only good and not sin.”

Sinlessness is not even a goal to strive for, for it is contrary to our fundamental natures. The test of our humanity is not never sinning but reaching for the attainable mitzvah of *teshuvah* – taking ownership of our nature and asking for genuine, deep and meaningful forgiveness. That is the measure of our spiritual well-being.

The *Tzadik* is not the sinless man but the man who takes responsibility for his actions, both good and bad.

Rabbi Yehonasan Gefen quotes a fascinating Tosefta about Judah. “Why did Judah merit the Kingship? Because he admitted [to his actions] in the incident of Tamar.”  His words ring loud and clear. “She is right, it is from me.” His honest, unequivocal admission of guilt without hesitation or reservation is the trait essential to lead a people, a nation. He who can “lead” himself can well lead others.

Adam blamed one and all. Judah blamed no one other than himself. The human struggle is between the “Adam” of our natures and our “Judahs”.

The distinction between the mere sinner and the righteous man? The quality that defines the leader from the follower? The ability to take responsibility for one’s actions; to perform the mitzvah of *teshuvah*.

It would be easy to look around ourselves and see that our culture is awash in the determination to blame someone else for anything and everything that is wrong. From the highest leaders to the most modest, blame always seems to land on someone else. Our political discourse is coarsened by this blame game. So too our personal interactions.

And yet, we know from Torah and the wisdom of our generations of teachers that if our times are unique they are unique in volume, not kind. Adam. *Chava.* Cain. The refusal to embrace the reality of *teshuvah* is interwoven in our beings. Relief from the burden of sin is *not* being perfect and never sinning. Relief from the weight and burden of sin is in grasping the attainable mitzvah of *teshuvah*.

But no. We blame everyone and everything but ourselves. It’s mommy. It’s daddy. It’s my third-grade teacher. It’s the music teacher who did not choose me to be in the chorus. It’s the coach who didn’t play me at first base. It’s the coarse environment. It’s the additives in the food I eat. It’s my genes.

It’s *anything and everything* but… me.

If fault lies with everyone and everything else, then *teshuvah* has, by definition, no meaning. The mitzvah that is commanded to us “this day” is meaningless. It does not matter if it is within reach, hidden or not hidden, distant or not distant. For if it is not *my* fault then there is no reason to do *teshuvah.* None.

“I am sorry” has no meaning for there is never anything to be sorry about.

What keeps us from reaching for that attainable mitzvah? What keeps us from taking responsibility? Pride. It is the sin from which all others arise. From pride comes arrogance. With arrogance, a dark, heavy and cold fortress grows around our hearts and souls.

Only by sincerely saying those three words, I am sorry, can that fortress come down and light, joy and warmth animate our souls and our lives.

We do not have the power to be sinless but the ability to be forgiven is within reach. We need only overcome our pride and embrace it.