Missing the Mark

What *is* Sin?

by

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“Speak to the Children of Israel, saying, When a person will sin unintentionally from among all the commandments of Hashem that may not be done, and he commits one of them.” (Vayikra 4:2)

Hmm. This strikes one as a troubling command. To seek atonement for mistakes made consciously or intentionally… that seems only right. Each of us must be held accountable for our actions. But for “unintentional” transgressions? How is it that God would demand atonement for something done inadvertently?

Isn’t there a difference between throwing a rock through a window and a ball we hit while playing with friends inadvertently break a window? The outcome is the same in both instances – a broken window. But certainly, we can appreciate a difference between an act performed *consciously and intentionally* and an outcome that we could not foresee. How can we be held to the same standard for mistakes made not only *un*intentionally but also unconsciously?

How can that be fair?

Of course, such a protest makes sense *if and only if* one holds that there are truly such things as unconscious or “inadvertent” mistakes. It might be true that to err is to be human but then we must look more closely at what that might mean, to be human.

Throwing a rock through a window might be malicious but doesn’t the decision to play a game where such an outcome *might* occur also demand consideration? What might be inadvertent *at the time of the accident* might have an antecedent in behavior and decisions that make the batter also culpable. So it is that our *midot*, our character traits, make us culpable for behaviors that might *seem* inadvertent. The more we understand our behavior, the more we understand that our transgressions are the logical outcome of our arrogance and envy, our ego and our selfishness. Certainly, no matter how “inadvertent” our transgressions if they are outcomes of such a nature our atonement is worthy and necessary.

The more we explore human nature and behavior, the more inescapable it is that even the most “inadvertent” act does not occur in a vacuum, it is inevitably the result of a whole sequence of minor, “barely noticeable” missteps. Honestly examine any mistake, any difficult relationship, and you are sure to discover something in your nature, your approach to life, your *midot* that contributed directly to the outcome.

It is in this context that we should evaluate what we mean when we say someone has “sinned”. Our understanding of sin is colored by a Christian sensibility, which associates sin with evil. Therefore, someone who sins must, by definition, by “bad”. But that is not the Jewish or the Torah understanding.

In Torah, the Hebrew word often translated “sin” is *chet,* but it does not mean “sin” at all. It appears in reference to a slingshot that has “missed its target”. That is, *chet* is something, or someone, who has gone astray, who has missed the mark. Rather than evil, the suggestion is that *chet* is a matter of straying from the correct path. Like an arrow shot that misses the bull’s eye, there is nothing “wrong” with the arrow; it has simply not arrived where it is optimally desired.

Like an errant arrow, off target by faulty aim, gravity, unanticipated wind gusts, etc., when we err it is not because we maliciously or consciously do wrong. No, it is rather that we have “misfired”, we have missed the mark. The presumption is that we *want* to hit the bull’s eye but something in our stance, in our posture, has altered our path.

Perhaps the soul’s “voice” has been muted by the din of the distractions around us. Perhaps a text message draws our focus at an inopportune time. Perhaps the lure of the ambient cultural roar pulls our thoughts away from what is good and holy. That is, perhaps the *yetzer hara* momentarily gets the better of us and, in that moment, we take a step in an errant direction, causing us to miss the mark further down the road.

Even as we miss the mark, even as the *yetzer hara* gets the better of us, our tradition teaches that our essence remains pure. We can wake up and realize we are on the wrong path; we can wake up and make the necessary spiritual adjustments to get back on target. We can do teshuva!

That is why, in the *parasha*, even though we do not intentionally sin we must still bring a sacrifice. Not because we are bad, but because we have inadvertently gone astray, we have fallen asleep at the wheel, and we must wake up!

We ask forgiveness *not for the unintentional* sin, but rather for what is going on inside, for the distraction that caused us to begin to go astray.

Our “inadvertent” mistakes are inevitably the result of placing ourselves in circumstances which make a mistake possible. Punishment for these mistakes is often directed at changing *behavior*. But as we learn more about ourselves, we understand that actions are relatively easy to modify. Character, on the other hand, is more difficult to change and it is character that is at the heart of our going astray.

The Rambam certainly agrees. In discussing how one is to repent his *aveirot*, he goes on to explore another, deeper aspect to true *teshuva.* “And do not say that there is only *teshuva* for sins that have an action such as immorality, stealing, and theft. Just as one must repent from these, so too he must search for his bad character traits and repent from them; from anger, from hatred, from jealousy... And these sins are harder than those that have an action to them, because when a person is engulfed in them it is hard for him to refrain [from them]”.

In this view, and in that of the Vilna Gaon, who taught that every sin is the result of a bad trait, Rambam is making clear that it is not enough to atone only for actions. For if a conscious transgression emanates from a character flaw, how much more so must the *unconscious* transgression be caused by such a flaw?

For the Rambam, every sin demands two levels of repentance – one for the behavior and one for the *midda* at its root. The conscious and the unconscious. Both from the same *midda*. Therefore, both requiring the same atonement.

How does one avoid the “inadvertent” outcome that inevitably follows a misstep dictated by character? By following the example of our sages and “building a fence” around the deep weakness. For example, if you’re not a “morning person” then you would do well to take extra precautions so that you do not “accidentally” oversleep, causing you to miss your flight, or your meeting, or your *shiur*.

“I must have been half-asleep, and I turned off the alarm…”

Set a *second* alarm beyond arm’s distance! Know yourself and *anticipate* that “inadvertent” mistake! Isn’t that precisely the kind of action our sages meant in teaching us to create a *gezeirah* around the Torah? Such a fence is not for the person *determined to transgress* but for the person determined *not* to.

Alshich makes clear that any inadvertent act (*b’shgaga*) is *always* the result of a previous misdeed done knowingly. He insists that it is impossible for one to commit a sin *b’shogeg*, ifdeep inside his inner being, there aren’t sins previously committed consciously and with deceit.  After all, he teaches, if the Talmud teaches (Chulin 5) that God would never bring about a sin through the animal of *tzadikim* certainly He would not cause tzadikim themselves to sin. How then does the sin come about? Thus, the Posuk says, “from among all the *mitzvos HaShem asher lo taasena –* the commandments of Hashem that may not be done.”

Every “inadvertent” error is predicated on a previous error *b’zadon* (knowing, conscious). Therefore, the error is not inadvertent at all, but *b’shogeg*. This is what King David meant when he exclaimed, *Shegiot mi yavin* (Yet, who can discern mistakes?)

There is always a history to sin, always a “trail of missteps.”

Alshich concludes that if you committed a sin *b’shgaga* then you’d better dig deep to discover the *meizid* act you’d previously committed that you have overlooked that had brought you to your current “mistake.”

R’ Samson R Hirsch explains that the word *Shegia* (mistake) denotes an error due to imperfect understanding and reasoning from which no man is immune and of which he is unaware. Only Divine assistance can protect a person from these inborn human flaws.

The one who is consistently tuned in to the *Ribono shel Olam* will therefore rarely “forget” or “just make a mistake”. He has built his fence around correct and righteous deeds. Such a person’s behavior does not easily allow him to make a *shegia*.

The Ramban too considers the posture and events leading up to a transgression. He teaches that though sins might be unintentional, even so they inevitably blemish the soul and require purification. Why? Because if the sinner had sincerely regarded them with due gravity and consideration they would not have occurred.

People are careful, serious and thoughtful about things that matter to them. They tend to be less so to things that don’t matter much. To someone for whom Shabbat is all important, the days of the week are never forgotten; they are an inevitable pageant leading to that glorious day. In other words, Shabbat would engage his entire thought process throughout the week, not only when he rushes home like a madman on Friday afternoon, hoping to arrive before candles are lit.

One who is scrupulous about *every* morsel that enters his mouth, does not have to worry about inadvertently confusing forbidden fat (*chelev*) with permitted fat (*shuman*). He has built his fence. He does not allow the “distractions” of life to distract him for his all-encompassing Godly obligations.