

For Sins Committed "Bein Adam L'atzmo": Asking Ourselves for Forgiveness

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Rabbi Dusty Klass and Rabbi Leah Citrin

With edits from Tim Klass and Rabbi Asher Knight

A few years ago, the manufacturer of Dove Soap ran a powerful campaign called Real Beauty.

In one advertisement, Dove hired a forensic artist to sketch people based solely on verbal descriptions. He created two drawings, one based on the subject's own descriptions and a second based on words from others.

When asked for specifics, people described themselves as follows:

"My mom told me I had a big jaw."

"[My chin] protrudes a bit, especially when I smile."

"I kind of have a fat, rounder face."

"I would say I have a big forehead."

Now listen to what strangers said:

"She had nice eyes. They lit up when she spoke."

"Cute nose."

"She had blue eyes. Very nice blue eyes."

After the artist was finished, he revealed both sketches. Consistently, the sketch drawn from a stranger's perspective was more flattering.

In looks and in life, we spend a lot of time dwelling on the things we do not like about ourselves. We berate ourselves for a million imperfections, all of the missteps we take as we move through our day.

We're running late, which makes the whole family run late.

We forget to pack lunch and end up eating junk, after committing to be better about the food we're putting into our bodies.

We don't take time to prepare fully and end up embarrassed that we haven't done our "homework."

We lose our cool and snap at our kids, or our siblings, or our parents.

We forget to phone friends we've promised to call and catch up with.

And then, when people get mad at us for these missteps, we add fuel to the fire, piling on our own anger at ourselves.

In the Talmud, *Kal V'Chomer* is an often-used category of rabbinic argument.

In short: if X is true, *Kal V'Chomer*, Y is even MORE true.

The lawyers in the room may be familiar with the Latin version, *a fortiori* (ah-for-tee-oh-ree).

If we are hard on our own looks and actions,

- *kal v'chomer* -

how much harder are we on our souls?

We're running late? *Kal v'chomer*, we're unorganized.

We eat junk? *Kal v'chomer*, we're unhealthy.

We snap at our kids? *Kal v'chomer*, we aren't patient.

We DO something bad, and think: *kal v'chomer*, we are bad.

Hillel, our Jewish sage, famously taught "*Im ein ani li, mi li?*"

If I am not for myself, who will be for me?"

***Kal v'chomer*: if I am not even for myself, how can I possibly be for anyone else?**

To act in the world, we must begin with ourselves.

Dr. Brene Brown writes about our culture of "scarcity" in her book *Daring Greatly*.

According to her research, we live in a world of "never enough."

We spend so much time assessing and calculating how much we have - how much time, how much money, how much energy, how much this how much that - that we build an imagined, impossible, idea of what "enough" should look like, and criticize ourselves for failing to meet those invented standards.

The key, says Brown, is to shift our focus from scarcity to wholeheartedness, to a culture in which we recognize our worth.

We are each enough.

We must only see our own value.

As those of you who joined us at Wildacres might remember, Hillel's message does not end with self. He continues: "*Uk'she-ani l'atmi ma ani?* And if I am only for myself, what am I?"

So too with forgiveness: "If I do not forgive myself, who will forgive me?" leads directly to "If I only forgive myself, what am I?"

When we build the capacity to forgive ourselves, we increase our capacity to forgive others.

In fact, building capacity to forgive ourselves may actually cause us to require less forgiveness from others.

So often we become inordinately frustrated with someone only to realize, later, that we were actually being challenged by something we don't like about ourselves.

Each year I co-write one High Holy Day sermon with my *chevruta*, my study partner Leah Citrin, Assistant Rabbi at Temple Beth Or in Raleigh.

This is our sixth sermon-writing season together.

As we were talking through this concept of self-forgiveness, we reflected on some of the moments in which we have become frustrated with each other

(and in any good chevruta, there are a few!) So many of those times, as we talked through our frustrations we came to realize that our difficulties with each other were actually rooted in issues we were working on personally.

We tend to be hardest on others for the challenges we have with ourselves.

We interrupt to say that we can't stand people who talk over other people.
We whisper to our friends about the way some people talk about other people behind their backs.

When we can forgive ourselves for our own shortcomings, we are better able to see how we have wronged those we love.

And once we acknowledge our self-inflicted pain, we see better how those around us may be similarly in pain, similarly struggling with how to forgive themselves.

Let me be clear: Not every instance of forgiving oneself must lead one to forgive others. Sometimes self-forgiveness is enough.

Assault victims often move through a great deal of guilt and shame in processing their experiences of attack. A victim's ability to acknowledge that she is not to blame for what happened to her does not require her to then forgive her attacker. Sometimes forgiveness simply means letting go of guilt and shame.

Other times, we can be proactive about our need to forgive ourselves by giving ourselves fewer opportunities to need to forgive ourselves in the first place!

When we are present with ourselves and our needs in the moment, we are less likely to act in ways that later require an apology.

I try to use a mnemonic called HALT.

HALT stands for:

hungry,

angry,

(those two tend to go hand-in-hand for me - hangry)

lonely,

tired.

The idea of HALTING is to pay attention to our bodies cues, delaying decision-making until we are in a better mental state.

When we hold off on making decisions while hungry, angry, lonely, or tired, we are more likely to make better, more reasonable decisions, which in turn greatly reduces the chance that we might mess up, feel bad, and need to employ self-forgiveness tactics.

Now, none of us can be present 100% of the time.

We all have moments in which, regardless of how self-aware we are, we do not recognize our emotionally charged state and make decisions we are not proud of.

On June 28th, five days after arriving in Charlotte and three days before my official first day at Temple Beth El, after three years of incident-free driving in Los Angeles AND a cross-country car trip, I noticeably scraped up the side of Dori, my bright blue Mazda.

I would like to tell you all that I was unfairly sideswiped by another driver.
Or even that the wall came out of nowhere. But I would be lying.

I was, very simply, not paying attention.

It was early, I was running late, I hadn't eaten breakfast. And in my hangry rush, I did not properly gauge the space needed to make the turn inside my apartment complex parking garage.

The moment I heard metal hit cement, it started.

Oh NO. Dusty, seriously? You ran into your own garage?? What were you thinking?

Then, I realized I was headed for the first time to this temple, as your rabbi.

Where I have a designated parking spot. So everyone will see what I have done. Three months later, as you all know, the scrape is still there.

Every time I see those white lines streaked across my car, I beat myself up all over again.

So when HALTing doesn't work,

When we run into our own garages - or yell at our spouses or embarrass a friend or see injustice and sit in silence when we could have said something - we have the opportunity to do something radical.

We have the chance to be as kind to ourselves as we are toward others.

When those we love become upset, we build them up. We acknowledge their feelings, respond to their pain, and offer kindness and understanding.

But when we ourselves become upset? We try to be strong, to ignore our struggles. We tear ourselves down over our imperfections.

Kal v'chomer: if being kind to others is key, how much more so is being kind to ourselves?

What might it look like to treat ourselves with kindness? It looks like naming when something is difficult. It looks like practicing self-compassion, reminding ourselves:

"Hey, self. You are human, just like everyone else.

And being human means being imperfect.

And there is beauty in your imperfection.

Being kind does not require us to absolve ourselves of responsibility -forgiving ourselves is different from letting ourselves off the hook.

But often, practicing self-compassion is the first step to taking action.

Until we forgive ourselves, we have not fully accepted responsibility for our errors and we cannot grow from them. Until I accept responsibility, my transgression lives on in the big white gashes along the left side of my car. Once I am kind enough to stop beating myself up, Dori goes to the body shop.

We all have metaphoric gashes on the metaphoric cars we drive through life. Our Vidui, the prayer in which we confess our sins, lists a great many of them.

Vidui begins with a reminder - God does not forgive us for sins we have committed against each other. It is up to us to apologize to those we have wronged, and to forgive those who have wronged us.

We seek forgiveness *bein adam l'makom*, between man and God.
We appeal for forgiveness *bein adam l'chavero*, person to person.

And we must also work to achieve forgiveness *bein adam l'atzmo*, for and from ourselves.

And so today I offer an additional prayer:

May we forgive ourselves,
and from that place of compassion offer the same to others.

May we remember that "I'm sorry" *is* a prayer,
and listen in wonder to the sound of our hearts crying

[...]

May we surround ourselves with life-affirming companions and dear souls, who sustain all the good that is within us.

May the gates of forgiveness always swing open for us as we open into humility and compassion.

May the year ahead be filled with purpose.¹

¹ adapted from Rabbi Sheryl Lewart