

“Easy to Appease”: A Yom Kippur Intention

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Yom Kippur 5782

Gilda Sheppard’s award-winning documentary film *Since I Been Down* begins in 1997, with a description of how a car full of teenagers, members of a gang, out in the middle of the night mistook another car full of teenagers for members of a rival gang, and began shooting, leaving one person dead...

Flashing forward, in the second scene, we then see a young African American man dressed in prison-issued clothing, standing on a stage giving a speech. Here’s what he says:

“My name is Kimonti Carter, and I’m currently serving a life sentence for a gang-related drive-by that happened 9 years ago. My victim was innocent. He was also a student who was attending college. His name was Corey Pittman. At this time, I would like to apologize to the Pittman family, because I have only now begun to understand that the enjoyment of life, once taken away, can never be replaced. And I’m sorry.”

Twenty-four years and counting from that fateful night in 1997, Kimonti Carter still lives inside a Washington state prison today. Unless our state’s laws change, he will be there for the rest of his life, with no chance of parole. This, regardless of the fact that, at the time of the shooting, he was only two months past his 18th birthday. This regardless of the fact that he and a whole generation of African-American youth who grew up in the Hilltop and Eastside neighborhoods of Tacoma in the 80s and 90s faced impossible odds, with poverty and poor educational opportunities. Many were recruited into California gangs and used to sell drugs and guns from a young age; in Kimonti’s case, he joined a gang at age 11. All this, despite the fact that Kimonti Carter has said that over time, the denial and old way of thinking he came to prison with evolved into a deep understanding of the pain and destruction he had caused. He has grown into a most self-aware human being, committed to his own betterment and continued growth, and helping others learn and building bridges. In 2013, working with the Black Prisoners Caucus, Carter started an educational program called TEACH that now operates across multiple Washington state prisons, through which incarcerated people can take for-credit college courses. A big part of the goal of that program is to remind these incarcerated individuals of their own humanity, to “re-humanize” as it were, to give them a shot at rehabilitation and repair.

If Kimonti Carter had committed exactly the same crime while standing on a sidewalk or in a parking lot or anywhere else, he might already have served his full sentence and have been released back into society. But, because he shot his weapon out the window of a moving car, Carter is not eligible for parole in our state. The law he was sentenced under was intended to target gang violence. Practically, this and other similar laws have meant that young men of color, in particular, are far overrepresented in Washington State prisons. In our state, for a whole host of reasons, not everyone has the same shot at redemption. **Not everyone has the same possibility of being forgiven and released, of achieving meaningful repair.**

When I first saw Gilda Sheppard's film, it screamed Yom Kippur to me, because on this day, we spend the whole day reflecting on themes of forgiveness and atonement, release and repair. Starting from Kimonti Carter's story today, I want to ask us to consider the flip side of the forgiveness coin... that is, not how we say I'm sorry and apologize when we have done something wrong, but rather, **under what circumstances we are willing to grant forgiveness, and to whom. What does it take to appease us, individually? On a collective, societal level, too, under what circumstances are we willing to grant forgiveness, and to whom?**

Perhaps you've heard the famous text from Mishnah Yoma (8:9) that reads as follows:

עֲבֵרוֹת שֶׁבֵּין אָדָם לְמָקוֹם, יוֹם הַכִּפּוּרִים מְכַפֵּר.

עֲבֵרוֹת שֶׁבֵּין אָדָם לְחֵבֵרוֹ, אֵין יוֹם הַכִּפּוּרִים מְכַפֵּר, עַד שֶׁיִּרְצֶה אֶת חֵבֵרוֹ.

For transgressions between a person and God, Yom Kippur atones.

For transgressions between one person and another, Yom Kippur does not atone **until the individual appeases the other.**

Yom Kippur, the Mishnah teaches, is the perfect time to ask God for forgiveness. But, if it's another human being I've hurt or offended or sinned against (and isn't it usually?!), Yom Kippur can't help me until I've done my own interpersonal homework first. The first step towards kaparah, atonement, is "appeasing the other person," "*ad she-yiratzeh et chaveiro.*"

Appease is not an English word we use very often, so we need to dig in a little deeper to understand what this might mean... that is, what it means to appease someone else, and also what it means for each of us to be appeased. The dictionary offers two definitions for the English word "appease." This verb means:

1. To pacify or placate (someone) by acceding to their demands.
2. relieve or satisfy (a demand or a feeling).

Appeasing is the human-human work that goes hand-in-hand with our Yom Kippur observance. Through this sermon, I want to push gently on all of us -- not to feel more guilt or to apologize more, but **to work on softening our hearts a bit and becoming more ready to accept apologies. I want us to build our forgiveness capacities...** on an individual, inter-personal level, and also when it comes to thinking about societal questions like restorative justice, and whether Kimonti Carter can ever do anything at all to earn a second chance at life outside prison. In other words, this Yom Kippur, **I want us to work on building our appeasement muscle... a muscle that perhaps you didn't even know you had!**

Last year in Havdalah Club, our older elementary school students studied a text from Pirke Avot (5:11) that goes like this (and I'm going to flip the order of the clauses around as I teach this text):

אֲרִבֵּעַ מִדּוֹת בְּדַעוֹת.

נוֹחַ לְכַעַס וְנוֹחַ לְרִצּוֹת, יֵצֵא שְׂכָרוֹ בְּהַפְסָדוֹ.

קָשָׁה לְכַעַס וְקָשָׁה לְרִצּוֹת, יֵצֵא הַפְסָדוֹ בְּשְׂכָרוֹ.

נוח לבעס וקשה לרצות, רשע:
קשה לבעס ונוח לרצות, חסיד.

There are four kinds of temperaments:

Easy to become angry, and easy to be appeased: their gain disappears in their loss;

Hard to become angry, and hard to be appeased: their loss disappears in their gain;

Easy to become angry and hard to be appeased: a wicked person.

Hard to become angry and easy to be appeased: a pious person;

This, it seems, is the objective. Pirke Avot wants each of us to strive to be: slow to anger – patient, not hot-headed – and simultaneously easy to appease – resilient, ready to let go, to bounce back, to forgive another.

If you happen to be a machzor nerd, you may recognize that vocabulary not only from Pirke Avot but also from our High Holiday prayers. In *Unetaneh Tokef*– the big liturgical piece that’s part of a traditional High Holiday Musaf service, with the “who shall live and who shall die” language – in that prayer, we continue on by talking about God. There, **we describe God as “kasheh lichos v’noach lirtzot”, “slow to anger and easily appeased”,** and we continue: “for You do not desire a person’s death, but rather that one turn from one’s path and live.” God believes, it seems, in restorative justice. In other words, being slow to anger and easily appeased is a Godly quality. On Yom Kippur, we name that in order to set the goal for ourselves of striving to achieve the same, to become the same.

Now, this might sound relatively straightforward, until we consider just about any real world case. Because in the real world -- and even in our tales and stories and folklore -- forgiveness is rarely so simple.

Perhaps this is why we read the story of Jonah on Yom Kippur. I’m guessing that you know the basic tale: that Jonah the prophet is commanded to get on a ship and go to Nineveh, and deliver a message to the wicked city that the people must repent. Jonah arises, instead flees exactly in the opposite direction... it seems he wants nothing to do with this mission God is sending him on. As he travels away from Nineveh, a storm comes up, and at his request, the other sailors throw him overboard, where he is swallowed up by a giant fish and spends three days in his belly. He prays inside the belly of the fish, seemingly sincerely, offering gratitude for having been saved. And that’s the famous part of the story.

But the most striking part of the story is actually what happens next. When Jonah arrives in Nineveh in chapter three, the people of that city listen to his words and repent immediately. They take the whole appeasing God thing all the way – they put on sackcloth and pray, they change their behavior, from king to people to the animals of the city. You might think Jonah

would feel really successful and accomplished. But instead, Jonah gets angry and irritated, and deems it a great evil that God has forgiven the city. Accusingly, lashes out at God, “O Eternal One, is this not what I said while I was still in my own land? I therefore hastened to flee to Tarshish, for I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, patient and abounding in kindness, and would relent from punishment.” (Jonah flings the 13 attributes back at God!) “So now, Eternal One, please take my life, for I would rather die than live.” Jonah, it turns out, is a stickler for justice. He cannot -- does not want to -- live in a world where the wicked people of Nineveh can be forgiven.

The Book of Jonah begs the question of whether we are more like Jonah sometimes than we want to admit... we are quick to anger, and slow to appease. We are exactly the opposite of the rabbinic ideal. That is, perhaps we want compassion and forgiveness for ourselves, but somewhere deep down, it's hard for us to grant it to others; we feel like other people should suffer their consequences; we don't always grant second chances. It's easy to feel appalled at Jonah 's harshness reading that story. And yet, our rabbinic tradition prescribed that we read this text on Yom Kippur each year, I believe, because they wanted to push the idea: that we all play the part of Jonah at times. We all act as gate-keepers, and resist being part of God's plan for a forgiving universe.

So how do we allow for change and renewal? How do we make space for second chances and for growth? These questions apply on every level, as we think about ourselves internally, as we think about others, and as we think about the society that we aim to build together. **How can we cultivate within ourselves the ability to forgive more readily, the capacity to be more gracious and to be more easily appeased?**

I want to offer three suggestion that might provide a focal point for our internal work this Yom Kippur, three core capacities we might think about, visualize, trying to build up within ourselves:

1) The first is the capacity to recognize of the other's humanity.

In Column McCann's book *Apeiogon* (that the Kavana book club read a year ago, but I'll admit that I was behind and just finished!), he unfurls the story of two fathers, one Palestinian and one Israeli, who have both lost their daughters to the violence that surrounds them. Bassam Aramin's 10-year-old daughter Abir was shot in the back of her head by a rubber bullet, coming out of a grocery store where she went to buy candy after school. Incidentally, that shot too came out the back of a moving vehicle, in this case an Israeli army jeep. Rami Elhanan lost 14-year-old daughter Smadar in a suicide bombing on Ben Yehudah street in Jerusalem, where she was shopping with her friends. Each of the two men follow paths throughout the book towards reconciliation, where they strike up an unlikely friendship, rooted in their shared grief... that

grief which is transformed, in essence, into a weapon for peace. Each begins in a place of anger and extreme sadness, craving revenge on some level, and slowly, slowly, we watch as they find the power of words (as a bumper sticker says: “zeh lo yigamer ad she-n’daber”, “this will not end until we learn to speak with one another”). Each one ultimately becomes appeasable and appeased... that is, becomes capable of viewing the enemy as human, of granting forgiveness. Anger dehumanizes, in the same way that prison does. Understanding someone else’s struggles, their perspective, re-humanizes, and gives us the foundation for building upon as we seek to become more forgiving. This Yom Kippur, I have a strong feeling that if these two men, Rami and Bassam, could do it in this most extreme of circumstances, I too can work to cultivate within myself the capacity to seek the humanity in every person I encounter.

2) My second suggestion is that we work on cultivating equanimity within ourselves.

As we’ve already learned, Pirke Avot asks us each to strive to be *kasheh lichos v’noach lirtzot* – slow to anger and easy to appease. The Derech Chaim is a commentary on Pirkei Avot written by the Rabbi Judah Loew, the 16th century Maharal of Prague. And on this Pirke Avot text, the Derech Chayim commentary says:

“If a person is hard to anger but easy to appease, such a person is certainly someone with equilibrium and straightness. And therefore, it is hard for him to veer from the equilibrium. But if he does veer, it is easy for him to return to the equilibrium, which is his place - since he is righteous and straight.”

אם הוא קשה לבעוס ונוח לרצות, בודאי אדם כזה בעל שווי ובעל יושר הוא, ולכך קשה שיצא מן השווי .
ואם הוא יוצא, נוח לחזור אל השווי, שהוא מקומו, שהוא איש צדיק וישר, כי הכנס היא יציאה בתגבורת
החימה מן השווי, ודבר זה מבואר.

Reading this text, I visualize an inflatable, weighted punching bag, one that has enough mass and heft to its base that even when you hit or kick it off balance, it returns to its upright position time and time again. Rabbi Loew is saying that this is what we should aspire to be like... to be solid and stable and composed enough at our core to be able to regain equilibrium easily when knocked off course.

This is the quality of equanimity. It’s a state of psychological stability that enables us to be maximally forgiving. A kind of solidity that we can spend this Yom Kippur day working on, internally.

3) And my third suggestion for what we might work on this Yom Kippur is that we can aspire to cultivate within ourselves a kind of softness, the opposite of hardness or harshness.

There’s a beautiful renewal teaching that Rabbi Rachel Barenblat shares in her description of a Yom Kippur she spent at Elat Chayyim 2004. She writes:

“One of the refrains of the holiday is ‘On Rosh Hashanah it is inscribed, and on Yom Kippur it is sealed.’ From this refrain we can intuit that while the heart may be solid on

Rosh Hashanah (so words can be inscribed on it), on Yom Kippur it must be soft like wax in order to be sealed. So it is incumbent on us to soften our hearts...”

In order for us to be *noach lirtzot* – easy to appease – in order to have that godly quality, we have to cultivate just the right amount of solidity (so we can bounce back) and just the right degree of softness. This Yom Kippur, this might be our *kavana* when we put our fist on our chest for the *Vidui*, the confessional prayers – that there’s a knocking at the door – *dofeik ba-delet* of trying to open up the heart and awaken it, because it is solid and we are solid. And also, there’s also a massage quality – a softening – reminder that we are pliable, we have incredible human capacity for growth and change. We are capable of softening and taking on new shape.

Again, I don’t want to pretend that any of this is simple. The Talmud tells lots of stories about rabbis who offend one another and have to ask for forgiveness. I will save these stories for another year, but let me assure you that they are messy stories. In all of them, the Hebrew word for appease is not *l’ratzot* but rather “*l’fayes*.” This Hebrew word *piyeis* is a really an interesting one – one that contains within it a sense of the arbitrary, like the word for lottery in contemporary Israel, *piyus*. Somehow, being appeased has to do with arbitrating or deciding... and perhaps this word hints it's sometimes arbitrary, not always logical, whose feelings get hurt and whose don't, which of us feel ready to grant forgiveness and which of us do not.

In other words, appeasement is deeply subjective. Even if I’ve offended two friends in the same way, it might take different methods – different words, different modes of righting a wrong – to try to appease each of the two.

And our tradition teaches it’s not always the right time to appease, even when it is Yom Kippur. Elsewhere in *Pirke Avot*, we learn a that one should not try to appease a friend during a period of anger. We also can’t be appeased or appease others when a wrong is ongoing and still being perpetuated... so, for example, I’m not willing to let go right now of my anger at politicians and radio hosts and others who are spreading disinformation and decrying masks and vaccine mandates while a pandemic is still raging and people are still dying. My willingness to be appeased has its limits, and can’t happen while harm is still playing out.

And yet – despite the complexity and despite the limitations – I believe deeply that Yom Kippur gives us the gift of the power to transform and grow: to do this ourselves, and to see this capacity in one another, and also to bake this quality into the society that we are building together. On a very fundamental level, I believe that we will be better human beings in the world, and the world we build together will be a better one, if we can exercise our appeasement muscle more often, starting from building our capacities within to humanize one another, to cultivating equanimity or solidness, and to softening our own hearts.

I don't know if Kimonti Carter will ever be awarded a second chance by our state. Next month, Kavana and many other Seattle organizations and congregations will band together to screen Gilda Sheppard's film and to engage in cross-community conversations about it. We will learn more about restorative justice, and education, and legislative change. We will certainly get to speak with Gilda Sheppard, the filmmaker, and we may even have an opportunity to speak with Kimonti Carter himself about the transformation he's experienced during his period of incarceration and, even more importantly, about the world he is trying to build through transformative educational programs, both inside and outside of state prison walls. I absolutely encourage you to join in, and to be part of this work, which is at once deeply spiritual and introspective, and also simultaneously justice-focused and change-oriented. The internal and the external are one in the same.

This Yom Kippur, as we spend the coming day together in prayer, my *kavana*, my intention, is to stretch myself internally to come closer to that high bar that Pirke Avot and our liturgy sets for us – of training ourselves, step by step, to be *kasheh lichos v'noach lirtzot*... slow to anger and easy to appease. Of course, I know that it's inevitable that I won't hit the mark 100% of the time, but that's where I set my sights for this year. This year, I will strive to **see the humanity** in each and every person I encounter. This year, I will strive to **find equanimity**, the quiet solidity of balance. This year, I will **soften my own heart**, to be better able to tolerate change in myself, in you, and in others. This year, I will **exercise my appeasement muscle**.

In this year, may we be sealed for goodness and blessing. I wish you *gmar chatima tova*.