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For the sin of thinking we are done atoning

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The High Holy Days are behind us and Sukkot begins tonight. Because tradition tells us so, we think we have done all that is required of us to obtain absolution for our sins.

We have only just begun, however. Tradition glosses over a reality regarding the High Holy Days. We seek absolution on those days, but whether it will be granted depends on everything we do after Yom Kippur ends. God does not care about what we say we are going to do. He only cares about what we actually do; whether we match our words with deeds between now and the start of the next High Holy Days season. Actions speak louder than words and, in God’s judgment, actions are all that counts.

What we were supposed to do during the 10 days from the start of Rosh Hashanah until the end of Yom Kippur was to look at the Jewish content of our lives, admit our shortcomings to ourselves and to God, and to commit ourselves to living better Jewish lives. If we carry through on the decisions we made, all is well. If we do not, as the Talmud teaches us, absolution is not possible. (See Mishnah Yoma 8:9.)

What, however, does that mean to live a better Jewish life? And what does leading a better Jewish life have to do with the mess our world is in?

If we keep kosher, will that stop the storms from getting worse year after year?

If we keep Shabbat, will that make COVID-19 go away?

If we put on t’fillin, will everyone in the world have enough nutritious food to eat?

We do need to keep kosher, observe Shabbat, put on t’fillin, and so forth, but that is not what it means to live better Jewish lives. Judaism is not a religion; it is a way of life. It is a system of living in this world, that encompasses every waking moment of a person’s life, and every conceivable aspect of that life, from the moment we get up in the morning until the moment we fall asleep at night. Keeping kosher, observing Shabbat, donning t’fillin and tzitzit are all meant as devices to keep us focused on how to live Jewish lives.

What is meant by living a Jewish life is outlined in the Torah and expanded upon by our Sages of Blessed Memory and the rabbis who came after them. Too many of us, however, do not see that. We think of the Torah as some dusty old book filled with outmoded rituals that have little or no relevance to us today.

The Torah, both in its narrow and in its broad sense, is about today. It is about our world and what we have to do to make it a better world than it is.

We just need to approach what the Torah has to say with an open heart and an inquiring mind.

Take the first chapter of B'reishit (Genesis). Read the words and it seems like we are reading a fairy tale—we would be wrong, but I can understand our thinking of it as such. Read the meaning of the words, however, and we are reading about the need to preserve the Earth, not destroy it; about racial, ethnic and sexual equality and harmony; about protecting the rights of all living things, whether they fly, swim, crawl, or flower in the springtime.

Torah law also insists that we not only talk the talk when it comes to social justice issues—whether it is gender equality or racial equality or creating a justice system that is truly just and truly equal for all—but that we walk the walk. To lead a better Jewish life means we have to be proactive when it comes to creating a more just, a more equitable, a more humane society.

Over and again, the Torah insists that we treat the stranger the way we treat our own citizens. To lead a better Jewish life means we have to be proactive in helping to ease the suffering of illegal immigrants, the children especially, who are living in sub-human conditions in detention centers.

Torah law insists that we provide financial aid at no interest to the people who need the help, and for us to do whatever else we can to help to ease the pain of their suffering. There is a lot of suffering going on out there right now because of COVID-19, and it may only get worse in the next months. To lead a better Jewish life means we have to be proactive in helping to ease that suffering.

The Sefer Chasidim, a 12th century work on Jewish law, rules that in times when prices for basic items rise excessively, those items should be sold below cost to those who need the items but cannot afford the inflated prices. (See paragraph no. 1049.) The Shulchan Aruch, the authoritative code of Jewish law written in the mid-16th century, specifically singles out prohibiting charging anything but the regular price for medications. (See the Shulchan Aruch Yoreh Deah 336; the ruling harks back to a discussion in the Babylonian Talmud tractate Y’vamot 106a that prohibits excessive fees in any emergency situation.)

Throughout the Torah, again as expanded upon by our sages, not only are we responsible for maintaining our own health, but we need to be concerned with the health of everyone else. Judaism maintains that all human life is precious and that we “must not stand idly by” when another person’s life is in danger (see Leviticus 19:16). It also maintains, however, that all humans are equally valued; that all are equally entitled to protection and preservation.

Maimonides, the Rambam, codified this in his Mishneh Torah, the Laws of the Murderer and of Saving Lives, 1:14: “Anyone who is able to rescue and nonetheless does not, violates the prohibition of ‘Do not stand idly....’”

To lead a better Jewish life means we have to be proactive in seeing to it that everyone has access to the basic necessities, and especially to the medicines they need, and at prices they can afford.

Torah laws protect the homeless and the hungry (this was the focus of the haftarah on Yom Kippur morning, taken from Isaiah 58), the elderly and the infirm, and set forth our responsibilities to each, including that we have to provide adequate nutrition and adequate medical care to people who need it, and that we need to have proper systems in place to deal effectively with such plagues as the coronavirus. To lead a better Jewish life means we have to be proactive in seeing to it that everyone has nutritious food and also have access to the medical care they need.

These laws may not be politically correct today—at least not in some quarters—but they are Jewishly correct and will always be so.

Torah law prohibits destroying anything that is useful to people, to the lower life forms, or to the ecology. A single verse about a food-bearing tree leads us to a library full of environmental and ecological laws based on the principle set forth in that verse, the principle known as bal tashchit—the principle of “do not destroy,” which prohibits wanton destruction of any kind, even of a tiny mustard seed.

In one place in the Talmud, this very same verse is used to prohibit the wasteful use of fuels or their derivatives—non-replenishable fossil fuels or naturally replenishing ones like olive oil. That, however, is only the tip of the iceberg where ecology and the environment are concerned, and all because of a single verse in the Torah that asks the question, “is the tree of the field a person that it can run away from you.” (See Deuteronomy 20:19.)

In the Talmud, we have laws that prohibit airborne pollution generally and smokestack pollution, specifically; we have laws against water pollution; we have laws against noise pollution; and of course, because of bal tashchit, because of “do not destroy,” we are very big on environmental protection.

To lead a better Jewish life means we have to be proactive in protecting our environment. And that includes supporting those organizations and individuals—and yes, even politicians—who work to improve our environment, who work to reverse the damage being done by global warming, rather than supporting those who work just as hard doing the opposite.

We cannot be content with having mouthed the right words on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. That does not work. It never has. Repenting means mouthing the words and then doing the deeds—in our homes, in our workplaces when we can get back to them, in the streets and in the stores and shops we go to, and, yes, in the election booth this November 3rd and every Election Day in the years to come.

That is how to live a Jewish life.

That is how we achieve absolution for our sins.