

At-One on Yom Kippur 5776  
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Here's a secret: Yom Kippur is not the Day of Atonement.

You may have thought it was the Day of Atonement but that's just because it's called that by just about every credible Jewish source: every Jewish professional, every English Bible translation, every prayer book. It's called the Day of Atonement even by Rabbi Wikipedia.

But I'm sorry, Yom Kippur is not the Day of Atonement. At least, not according to the modern definition and usage of the word atonement. The *Oxford English Dictionary* says "atonement" means "reparation for a wrong or a sin." Today is not a day devoted to sin, to messing up.

Here's another secret, Yom Kippur is not the "Day of Affliction." You may have thought it was the Day of Affliction, but that's just because it says so in the most popular and credible translation of the Torah.

But I'm sorry, Yom Kippur is not the Day of Affliction." At least not according to the modern definition and usage of the word "affliction." The *OED* says "affliction" is "something that causes pain or suffering." Today is not a day devoted to pain and suffering. The Hebrew in the commandment to "afflict" ourselves is *initem*, from the root *anah* meaning "to be lowered." *Anavah* is humility. Not affliction, not self-harm or self-injury.

So, if Yom Kippur is not the Day of Atonement, nor the Day of Affliction, what is it? Or, most importantly, why is it important for us to know and understand that it's *not* the Day of Atonement and *not* the day of Affliction?

A story.

A little boy was overheard talking to himself as he strode through his backyard, baseball cap in place, with ball and bat.

He stepped up to his imaginary batting box and proudly said to himself, "I'm the greatest batter in the world." Then he tossed the ball in the air, swung, and missed. "Strike one!" he yelled out.

Undaunted, he picked up the ball, and again he said, “I’m the greatest batter in the world.” He threw the ball into the air, watched the ball descend as he swung . . . and again, he missed. “Strike two!”

He paused, he straightened his cap, took a deep breath—he took a moment to examine bat and ball carefully. Then with all his heart he said, “I’m the greatest batter in the world!” He threw the ball into the air.” He swung the bat hard. . . . and again missed the ball.

The little boy leaned down to pick up the ball, he looked at it in his hand, lifted up his head and said, "I'm the greatest pitcher in the world!"

This little story has more to do with the meaning of Yom Kippur than the words “*atonement*” and “*affliction*” combined. And that’s not just because when you combine them you get afflonement or attiction. (Although that is technically true).

Let’s parse our story. Three aspects of this boy’s attitude embody the message of Yom Kippur:

First: **Failure.** Failure is more than “acceptable,” it’s prerequisite. It’s inevitable. It’s essential in the recipe of living. Our biblical authors knew this: they didn’t waste much time in making that point. They taught this in Genesis, from the very start, when we get a story about what it means to be human. It means messing up: at worst making a terrible decision with grave consequences; but at best, to be human means to color outside of the edenic lines, and nevertheless live a life that is filled with hope. Our young baseball player, too, begins his narrative by swinging and missing. And then what?

Second: **Devotion.** The boy fails, and he “tries, tries again.” How often do we give up too soon? After we fail at something, how often do we assume we’re just not good and turn away? Not this kid—this boy picks up the ball, without cursing himself, without saying, “what’s wrong with you!” without saying, “why can’t you hit the ball!” Because these kinds of messages—they can pile up and spill over into other areas of life. They’re harmful to the soul. They really are! Because if you say them enough, you start to believe them. Devotion requires a special ingredient: the willingness to suspend

your self-doubt. That voice inside that says, “you just *can’t*” – you just *can’t* let it win.

The Israelites once found themselves at a moment like this – when they were scouting the land. Ten of the scouts said, “we can’t, we don’t have it in us, we’re not good enough, not big enough, not strong enough.” And a minority, just 2 of the 12, said, “*yachol nuchal la – yes we sure can,*” we can do this: we can *ascend*. What’s amazing about their story is that all 12 of them saw the very same facts on the ground! They just took a different attitude toward themselves. Those two, Joshua and Caleb, held a different....

Number Three: **Perspective**. Gaining perspective means looking at a situation- at yourself, your surroundings, your relationships – from as many vantage points as you can. It means pausing, seeing, and thinking. You don’t solve a problem by looking at it from one angle in one moment. Try that with a rubix cube and see how far you get.

In the Torah, no one puts this to practice better than God. Yes, that’s right, contrary to the bogus claim that the biblical God is omniscient, we find that God doesn’t always know the right way to go. God needs Abraham to argue the other side; God needs Moses, time and again, to urge God to change. And it works.

Because of these three things—the acceptance of failure, the embodiment of devotion, and the willingness to change perspective—this kid becomes “the greatest pitcher in the world.” Or, rather, he realizes that he was the greatest pitcher in the world all along.

By the way, in baseball this is how some of the “greats” became great- how batters learned they were meant to be pitchers, or pitchers meant to be batters. We’re talking about giants like Tim Wakefield, Mark McGwire, Stan Musial, and some mediocre fellow name George Herman Ruth. (I know, still a sore subject in this town.)

Without swinging the bat and missing, without failure, there is no success.

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Acclaimed biologist at Columbia University, Stuart Firestein, in his newest book *Failure: Why Science is So Successful*, argues that failure is.... why

science is so successful....

Science is and has always been riddled with mistakes - and that's a good thing! He argues that the missteps we take along the arc of scientific history are essential to each and every achievement. Society does a tremendous disservice when we tell the stories of success by leaping from one discovery to the next, hopping over the failures that made them possible.

To be clear, Firestein is not arguing for some optimistic cute thesis about failure being “okay,” that you just need to “get back on that horse” and persist. He’s not merely validating mistakes as a part of what happens. He’s talking about a much more fertile, integral view of failure. Consider this distinction. He writes:

“Edison claimed he never failed, just found 10,000 ways that didn’t work. But eventually he succeeded.... This is good advice for an inventor, less so for a scientist. Einstein lived on failure, his own and those of others, not just ways that didn’t work. His working failures were deep inconsistencies, failures of theory, failures that produced understanding even more than success. No failure, no science.”

In other words, according to Firestein, Edison’s failure says *keep failing until ya get it right!* But Einstein’s failure treats it as a generative force for understanding, a step forward. He uses the phrase “working failure” – failure WORKS! Failure is progress!

What a glorious reframing of failure: for it is this description of *failure in science* that so suitably describes the view of failure in Judaism, the failure with which we reckon on Yom Kippur, which includes moral and ethical failures.

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There’s nothing simple about this view of failure. It doesn’t reduce the magnitude of our mess-ups. No one is “off the hook” when it comes to mistreatment; this is not about “feeling good about yourself.” Most significantly, his view of failure is not about the improvement of “self-esteem.”

For decades we've discussed the problems of low self-esteem. But this is different than self-esteem, this is about practicing what Psychology Professor at University of Texas Dr. Kristen Neff calls, "Self-Compassion." Self-compassion is about approaching your failings with kindness, mercy, and compassion, instead of harsh judgment and self-affliction—which, by the way, we ask God not to exercise on us during the High Holy Days.

Neff writes:

"In contrast [to self-esteem], self-compassion is not based on positive judgments or evaluations.... People experience self-compassion as a result of being flawed human beings.... This means that self-compassion offers more emotional stability than self-esteem because it is available in times of failure as well as success."

Neff is pioneering this new field with her research and training programs, developed in collaboration with Dr. Christopher Germer, a Psychologist at Harvard Medical School. With growing evidence linking the practice of self-compassion with happiness and psychological well-being, with healing and recovery from trauma and abuse, we are now better-equipped than ever to grasp the bond between messing up and growing up!

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Failure and success are inextricable. When we fail to include how we fail in the same conversation as how we succeed, then we fail to see ourselves fully and honestly. We fail to become AT-ONE with ourselves.

To be AT-ONE.

Repeat these two words after me: "AT ONE." ("AT ONE!")

Again "AT ONE" (AT ONE!).

This is the meaning of Yom Kippur. To be AT-ONE.

AT-ONE is the origin of the word "ATONE." Atone, being "at-one," is not about sin, it's about relationship. In antiquity it referred to being "at one" with the Divine. We'd make sin offerings, watching the smoke rise up to the heavens—a way of connecting humanity and divinity, visually and spiritually. This was holy unification: a way of being *AT-ONE* with God.

Yom Kippur is not the Day of Atonement, it is the Day of At-One-ment. The very word “*Kippur*” means “to cleanse, to *reconcile*,” to be *at one* : at-one with failure, at-one with sin—at-one with our friends and family, at-one with ourselves and at-one with God.

*Perhaps you’ve heard the famous Hasidic tale of Reb Zusya, who was sick and lying on his deathbed. He was upset and crying, with tears streaming down his face.*

*His students surrounded him, saw him distraught—all they wanted to do was comfort him. They asked with great concern, “Reb Zusya, why are you upset? Why are you crying? Are you afraid when you die you will be asked, ‘why you were not more like Moses?’”*

*Reb Zusya looked at his students lovingly, and replied through his tears, “I am not afraid that the Holy One will ask me ‘Zusya, why were you not more like Moses?’ Rather, I am afraid that God will say to me: “Zusya, why were you not more like Zusya?”*

Today we do not deny ourselves, we do not reject or afflict ourselves. Today we *become* our selves. We embody the yearning of Zusya, and we *become* at-one, truly and fully.

Yes, this is an ominous, pensive day. Yes, we fast; we reckon with mortality, we make the day “hard” in a whole slew of ways. Yes, there are some texts in our prayerbook that suggest that we rough ourselves up. Our tradition’s not monolithic, God forbid. But above all, the dominant message of this day is that we celebrate the soul, we cherish the spirit.

Each and every one of us, no matter how messy life gets, has a soul that is pristine and pure. This is a truth that, with remarkable alacrity, we fog up amid the clutter of life: our chaotic schedules, our stress, our sins, our blunders. All of these muddle a truth that Yom Kippur gifts to us: that no matter what, you can become *you* once again.

Yom Kippur is the Day of At-One-ment, the day that says to us—each of us:

If you live with failure the way you live with success,  
if you live with devotion in your heart,  
if you allow yourself to see yourself as your authentic self,

then no matter how many times you swing and miss,  
today can be the day when you, strolling upon the field of our your own  
soul, discover whether you are the greatest batter or the greatest pitcher in  
the whole wide world.

May this day be for us all a genuine Yom Kippur: A Day of Self-  
Compassion, A Day of At-One-ment.

Amen.