



Imagine if we could actually do it.  
 Like, for real.  
 Imagine if today actually worked.  
 Imagine if all the words about atonement came true.  
 Imagine if we could wipe the slate clean.

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As Yom Kippur begins this evening, there is confidence - follow the plan.  
 We are about to recite the *Ya'aleh* prayer that sketches out the roadmap for the day.

Its structure is simple - let our prayers rise up this evening, arrive at the heavens in the morning, and be manifest as the day comes to a close at *Ne'ilah*, the final service of Yom Kippur.

Later tonight, we will chant "*Maḥar ya'aseh Adonai et-hadavar hezeh* - Surely You [God] will do so tomorrow;" You will definitely forgive us.

Our forgiveness is going to be there, waiting for us like an Amazon Prime delivery... Well, except when they suddenly tell you that it's a bit late...

The Talmud reinforces this paradigm by telling us the *secret*.

God states, Whenever the Jewish people sin, let them act before Me in accordance with this order.

Let the prayer leader wrap (himself) [themselves] in a prayer shawl and publicly recite the thirteen attributes of [My] mercy, and I will forgive them." We know these attributes: "*Adonai, Adonai, El Raḥum V'hanun*, the God of Compassion and Graciousness... (Rosh Hashanah 17b)

That's it.

That's clearly why we keep singing those 13 attributes over and over again - we know it's the get-out-of-jail-free card, and we want to make sure we've used it correctly!



Tomorrow evening at *Ne'ilah*— we will chant a prayer poem entitled: “*Leikh B’simḥah*,” whose refrain boasts - “Go forth joyfully, and with a full heart, partake of your meal and drink your wine.” (Moshe Ibn Ezra from Eccles. (9:7)

There is such confidence - we have prayed, we have repented, and we have fasted, so we’re good; let’s eat!



You have a clean slate.

This is why the tradition invites couples on the day of their wedding to fast until after the *huppah* (*the wedding ceremony*), to wear white, and to recite the Yom Kippur Amidah with its confessional - creating a pre-wedding mini-Yom Kippur - so you can start your new life together with a *tabula rasa*.

Easy-peasy.

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But it’s not so easy.

In reality, we cannot just wipe away our missteps.

We can’t wash them away.

Even when we go through a serious process of asking for forgiveness which includes: awkwardly acknowledging the details of how we hurt someone else, apologizing for it, and promising not to do it ever again, some of the hurt remains.



We cannot remove all the pain. Often, we don't even realize how someone else has experienced us or how our words have impacted them.

This is not easy.



Shakespeare describes this best when he has Lady Macbeth declare, “Out, damned spot! Out I say!” (Macbeth Act 5, Scene 1) There is no actual blood on her hands, but she has blood on her hands because of the guilt she bears.

Sin stays around and is not washed away so easily.

In the popular imagination – on television and in the movies – we can erase someone’s memory - think of *The Good Place* - or the neuralyzer pen from *The Men in Black*.

But in real life, our memories and our misdeeds don't really get erased.

Our errors, our sins, our transgressions, our missteps, they all remain with us. And they leave scars.

When I hurt someone, and even though I have apologized and we've talked it out, and I've been forgiven, the memory of the hurt is there.

For years.

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I would like to posit that Yom Kippur does not actually work - at least not in its basic presentation.

Yom Kippur is not actual; it is aspirational.

Tonight, we are being invited on a journey not to fix everything. But to begin to explore an approach towards improving everything.

We are not going to wash everything away, we are going to examine.

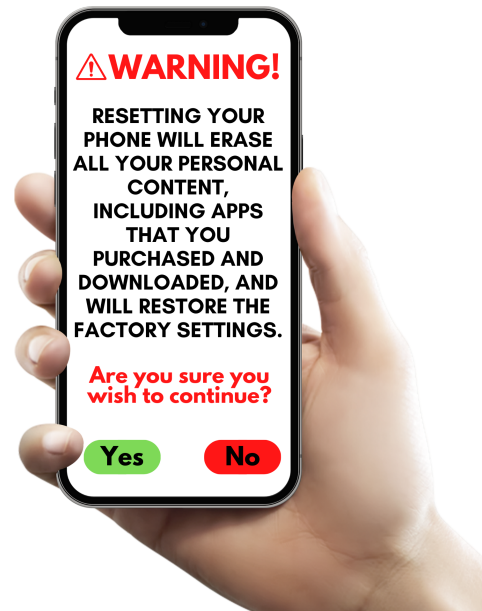
We are going to consider what we can do to change in order to minimize the hurt we have caused.

That's what this entire season is all about. We have been thinking, mulling over, and reflecting on our lives and our relationships, and today we take all of that, all of these memories, all of these feelings, all the pain and hurt, and we take them with us on this 24-hour journey.

Yom Kippur becomes the vessel to hold and explore what we have done, what we have said, and then we do not press a hard reset button, because we're not phones, we're people, fragile and complex.

Instead, we take all of that and see how we can work with it.

Maybe it's more like an app that will be sending us constant reminders over the next day, and we need to follow a protocol and take action to reset our software so we can be better.



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During the last couple of years and especially since my father's death, and as my kids are growing up into young adults, I have been reflecting more than I have before.

What is truly important?

What do I regret?

I cannot go back and have those dinners I missed with my kids.

I cannot change the times I was too reactive.

But I **can** start to do better right now.

How have I changed since last Yom Kippur?

What can I still change?

That is the thought process we are invited into over these *yamim noraim*, these Days of Awe - an attempt to dive into our behaviors and revisit where we are, where we yearn to be.

The Talmud relates the following debate:



“The Sages taught: For two and a half years, the School of Shammai and the School of Hillel disagreed. One said: It would have been preferable had humans not been created rather than that they were created. And the other said: It is preferable for humans to have been created rather than that they had not been created. [Ultimately, they were counted (presumably all of humanity’s actions) and concluded: It would have been preferable had humans not been created rather than been created.”

(Not the best view of humanity, but some might say it’s true....)

The Talmud continues: “However, now that they have been created, (they) [humans] should examine their actions [that they have performed and seek to correct them]. And some say: They should scrutinize their planned actions [and evaluate whether or not and in what manner those actions should be performed, so that they will not sin].” (Eruvim 13b)

Our great sages, Hillel and Shammai are aware of the depths of human imperfection. We make messes. Perhaps even on the scale of the universe, we have made more messes than we have cleaned up, but since people are here, we should examine our deeds, and think about what we have done and what we are doing.

The Hebrew here is illuminating - *yifashfesh* - examine our actions and *yemashmesh* - scrutinized their planned actions. Rashi explains that the *yifashfesh* looks backward; we should see how we *have* acted, while *yemashmesh* looks forward - what will the consequences of our future actions be?

This is a nice framing - we look back on Rosh Hashanah; hence, its name: Yom Hazikaron - the day of Remembrance.

Yom on Yom Kippur, we are looking forward. How can we explore what is before us to make the best choices when we are confronted with many different moments and decisions?

While *yifashfesh* - meaning examining our deeds - is how that root is used exclusively in our tradition, the second word is more nuanced. *Yimashmesh* means to feel around, to move things around. We can *yimashmesh* in our pockets for some loose change, although ideally not on Yom Kippur!

This wonderfully onomatopoeic word reminds me of our Rosh Hashanah ritual of *Tashlikh*, which evolved in the Middle Ages during the time of Geonim, in the 8-10th Centuries.

Traditionally, it is observed by going to a body of flowing water, throwing bread crumbs from our pockets which represent our sins into the water so they will be carried away.

In recent years, we have learned that throwing bread in the water is bad for the ducks' digestive system, so we should use oats. I thought we could stick pepto-bismol tablets in a piece of *hallah*, but this idea was rejected.

As I headed out to meet our group walking to Potter Pond last week for *Tashlikh*, I grabbed some oats that I had pre-loaded into a bag.



It was only upon walking over that I reached into my pocket and found that I had accidentally taken a bag of leftover matzah farfel from last Pesah.

I got the holiday slightly wrong.

But as I was thinking about the custom, scrounging in my pocket for my crumbs, my sins, I realized this is a great metaphor for what we are doing. The oats I threw didn't get carried away in the pond but floated and slowly started to dissolve into the water.

It was like making oatmeal and stirring it up until the oats softened.

*Tashlikh* - which Bulgarian Jews actually perform today on Yom Kippur - is what we are aiming for today.

We should *yimashmesh* our actions, turning them over and over again - softening our sins.

Perhaps the words we recite at *Tashlikh* and we just read in the haftarah on Shabbat *Shuvah*, the Shabbat of Repentance - are instructive. The prophet Micah declares that God "will again have compassion upon us; (He will), suppressing our iniquities. And we will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea."

We need compassion and kindness as we ponder our deeds, feeling into the pockets, the recesses of our memories of our actions, asking for help to suppress our inclinations that are not so helpful.

And then we can cast those parts in the sea where they get processed - never disappearing, but being transformed into something new, something that helps us in the coming year, something that aids us in the journey of our lives.

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So does Yom Kippur really "work?"

It may not "work" like taking a pill, but it gives us the opportunity to create the container for the harder work that is essential to our lives.

May this be a year when our aspirations move us closer to actions - when we align our dreams with our determination, our conceptions to concrete behaviors, our reaches into reality.

Let's start now.

