

I love sports. My friends, I just love sports so much. Competitive sport, and especially team sports, is a central metaphor through which I see the world. I believe that a quite large portion of the most important life-lessons I ever learned were learned either on a playing-field or in the stands (or on the couch) watching a professional game. I learned about sportspersonship, responsibility, awareness, leadership, how to win with grace, and how to lose with dignity. Sports-watching, my wife will tell you, is just as much a ritual for me as fasting a couple times a year or lighting Shabbat candles. The ritual includes special dress, special seating arrangements, the singing of songs and, given my die-hard Philadelphia sports fandom, the expectant pain of consistent disappointment.

The COVID-19 pandemic removed these rituals from my life for a period of a couple of months, and while it rightfully paled in comparison to the immensity of loss our country and the wider world has incurred, I must admit: losing sports hurt so much worse than I thought it would. These days, though, sports are back up and running. I'm watching as many games as my work-life balance will allow and getting back to being routinely disappointed by my favorite teams. It feels so good—**and I feel so guilty.**

Sports should probably not be happening right now. The leagues that have not set up “bubbles” have been plagued by outbreaks of the virus. Those leagues who have set up bubbles have largely avoided any major effects of the virus, but the cost of setting up these bubbles has been enormous. From the league’s perspective, and probably from the fan’s perspective too, it was money well spent. The NBA had about a billion dollars on the line, and sometimes you have to spend money to make money. And yet, I feel guilty. I feel guilty as the billion dollars that the NBA will make by salvaging their season could have and probably should have been used to fund so much relief from this pandemic. I feel guilty because I am reminded of the thousands of workers at arenas all around the country whose jobs were either furloughed or outright lost. And I feel guilty, most of all, because I am loving every second of it.

This particular kind of emotional or mental anguish is often referred to by psychologists as *cognitive dissonance*. Science has all sorts of explanations and definitions for cognitive dissonance. Basically, though, it is what occurs when the mind feels tension from holding two conflicting thoughts, which creates a battle about exhibiting the right behavior during ethical dilemmas. My Jewish values of *pikuach nefesh* and honoring the worth and dignity of every person

regardless of their salary are at odds with my overwhelming feelings of joy and delight as I watch our new shortstop hit home-runs. I end up in bed later that night feeling what was best described by 20th Century French Jewish theologian Emmanuel Levinas as “mauvaise conscience.” The whispering thought in the back of my mind, just before I close my eyes to fall asleep, that reminds me: ***“I could have, I should have done more today.”***

Today, Yoma, Shabbat Shabbaton, Yom HaKippurim, is singular among our chagim in its ability to throw our minds into dissonant cognition. It is a day on which our singular hope is to be sealed within the book of life for another year, and yet it is a day on which we perform our own deaths as we fast and many wear kittels which symbolize the burial shroud. It is the day on which we seek ultimate forgiveness from God, yet it is also the day on which we admit to God that we are essentially unworthy—confessing to sins we have not even committed, describing ourselves as stiff-necked, stubborn, helpless sinners. It is the day of the year when we can get closest to God, as we re-enact that moment of moments from the days of the Beit HaMiqdash when the Kohein Gadol would enter the holy of holies and utter God’s name aloud. And yet, our liturgy would make it seem like our relationship with the Divine is on the brink of collapse: ***“Al tashlicheinu milfanecha, v’ruach***

kodshecha al tikach mimenu.” “Do not cast us away from Your presence, do not remove Your holy spirit. Do not cast us away when we are old; as our strength diminishes, do not abandon us. Do not abandon us, Eternal God.”

Cognitive dissonance can be incredibly frustrating. It can muddle your life experience and disorient your ethics. I have this experience every time I attend the AIPAC policy conference. I love Israel so much, and I am keenly aware of both her myriad strengths and admirable qualities and her deep and systemic flaws as a society and democracy. At the conference there is a sort of main stage where the plenary meetings happen. Thousands of folks of all backgrounds who’ve come together to learn about and hopefully strengthen the relationship between Israel and the United States sit together in the massive hall, watching incredible presentations from entrepreneurs, scientists, doctors, artists, clergy, celebrities, politicians and more. In those plenary sessions American politicians come up and give their messages about the U.S. Israel relationship. Sometimes their words are utterly abhorrent to me, and other times they say exactly what I’m hoping they’ll say.

The most confounding plenary experience, however—the experience that heaps buckets of cognitive dissonance upon my mind—is when

politicians whom I absolutely cannot stand and with whom I almost **NEVER** agree on other policy issues, get up on the stage and offer the exact words I'd hope any American politician would. I have found myself applauding the words of individuals whom, in other contexts, I have condemned unequivocally. This kind of cognitive dissonance is actually, I think, a good thing. It is a reminder to me that what I am actually applauding is the message, not the person. The experience of clapping for a political adversary is one that reminds me that politics should be bigger than politicians; that what is at stake is my relationship to my values, not my relationship to an individual or institution.

Too often, the work of teshuvah is confused with the pursuit of s'lichah and m'chilah, pardon and forgiveness. Of course saying our sorries to those whom we've wronged is part of our traditional practice in Elul, but this is not the end of teshuva. Rather it is the means by which we begin (or continue) the work of teshuvah. Teshuvah is, in its essence, a cognitively dissonant endeavor. In the pursuit of forgiveness, what is at stake is a relationship to an individual, or God. In teshuvah, however, what is at stake is our relationship to our values, to the way we understand **who we are**. In that sense, teshuvah can be confusing. The root of the word teshuvah is שׁוּב, which translates

most directly to returning. We are meant, through teshuvah, to return to the best of ourselves. We cannot return, however, to some idealized past version of ourselves, though. To do so would not be to improve, nor would it constitute meaningful growth. Do you even know what the best version of yourself is? Could anyone? How is this even possible?

Maimonides acknowledged the cognitive dissonance implicit in teshuvah. He argued that complete teshuvah is not achieved until a person is in position to make the exact same mistake they made before, and chooses this time to act differently. He speaks, in Mishneh Torah—Repentance, of a man who makes a grave moral mistake that threatens his entire life's foundation. Somehow, some way, a year later the man finds himself yet again in the exact same situation. He is with the same people in the same place he was before, he still feels the same way about them and his physical abilities haven't changed. The only way, RaMBaM teaches, that this man can ***complete*** his teshuvah, is to decide this time to extricate himself from the situation, instead of making the same mistake he made a year prior. But shouldn't the work of teshuvah have led him not to make the string of mistakes he'd have needed to make to again end up in such a situation?

Shouldn't his dedication to that teshuvah process render this example impossible? YES.

This is, I would argue, the exact point of this example, and the specific benefit of the cognitive dissonance brought on by Teshuvah and Yom Kippur. Complete teshuvah to the Maimonidean standard is impossible. The work of teshuvah is a lifelong journey of self-evaluation and re-evaluation. It is predicated, not on forgetting our failures and returning to the person we were before we've sinned, but rather on returning to the path toward righteousness and goodness. This is why so many of our words for sin have a linguistic connotation of trajectory. A "Cheit" is a moment where we've missed the mark. An "aveirah" is a moment where we have literally transgressed, crossed a moral boundary line. Teshuvah is about returning us to the straight path. It is not a destination, it is a journey.

The cognitive dissonance of Yom Kippur, then, is a helpful one. As our souls and minds are stretched in opposite directions by our liturgy and rituals, we are forced to reckon with a dissonant truth: That we too often stray from the straight path, and that we can only improve if we are given the chance to return to that path. The mauvaise conscience, the whisper in the back of our minds before we go to sleep is not just a chastising voice. It is not meant to

depress us and mire us in our ethical inconsistency and cognitive dissonance. It is not merely saying to us: “You didn’t do enough today to right the wrongs of your world.” It is actually saying: “**Today**, you didn’t take as many steps forward down the path toward discovering your best self. **Tomorrow you must do better.**” Yom Kippur is our day, as a people, as a community, to affirm that in 5780 we did not take enough steps forward. We must do better in 5781. Embrace the dissonance with me as we fast today. Embrace the dissonance with me as we struggle with difficult theology today. Resolve yourself, arm in arm with me, to take more steps forward than backward in the year to come. Perhaps then, as the world slowly begins to reopen for us, we won’t be burdened by as much guilt and can kick back and enjoy the game with a clearer conscience. G’mar tov.