

YOM KIPPUR

Pre-Yom Kippur Confessions of a Drug Addict

2005 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

Okay! I admit it! I have at least one vice! I am addicted to a drug. I have beaten the habit in the past. I have, on occasion been "on the wagon" and off drugs for months at a time. But eventually, I have repeatedly succumbed to my body's desire for that wonder drug.

I am talking, of course, about coffee.

When you keep the kind of crazy hours that I do, it is easy to find excuses to justify one's continued dependence on this addictive substance. My 5:30-in-the-morning study partner politely ignores the coffee slurps coming through the phone. You can always tell which page of the Talmud we are up to by seeing where the brown stains end. And when your email inbox shows that your most recent Torah Talk message was sent out at three in the morning, you can be sure that that week's "words of wisdom" contain significant traces of java. My kids used to say, whenever I went into the convenience store at the gas station, that I was buying "Daddy gas."

I usually manage my addiction pretty well. It is, after all, socially acceptable to consume the stuff. (Some people think it's okay to drink de-caf, (A.K.A. "unleaded" :-)) but I've always felt that it defeats the purpose.) I usually get by on my 2-to-5 cups of coffee per day and manage to stay alert.

My only problem is fast days. I learned the hard way that the best way to get an excruciating headache is to give up coffee "cold turkey." One cannot consume vast amounts of coffee one day, and then no coffee the next day. I learned that on the dawn-to-dusk fasts, I can get by with a large cup of coffee right before the fast begins. By the time withdrawal starts to take effect twelve-to-fourteen hours later, the fast is over.

The only real problem is on the 24-hour fasts, Tisha B'Av and Yom Kippur. Over time I've developed a very efficient system. About a week before, I start to slowly reduce my coffee intake to one cup per 24-hour period. It's not easy, but I manage. I don't drink any coffee for the 24 hours before the fast. Then, at the final meal before the fast, I have a "double." That seems to work pretty well. (Of course, I usually ask myself at the "break-the-fast" why, now that I've kicked the habit, am I starting the cycle again?)

Yesterday, I was struck by a horrible realization. I forgot to initiate my pre-Yom Kippur detox program. I drank several cups of coffee yesterday, and Yom Kippur is only two days away! What am I going to do?! How could I have forgotten to prepare for Yom Kippur?!

That's when it hit me.

"How could I have forgotten to prepare for Yom Kippur?!" Would that we would make sure to take the time to prepare for Yom Kippur in truly important ways. Would that we would take the time to clear our spiritual systems of addictions to sin. If only we could learn to kick the habits of gossip and pettiness. If only we could end our dependence on bad habits. If only we could learn to be addicted to G-d's ways!

Kick those bad habits! The time is short. Cold turkey is not easy, but it can be done. Ask G-d for help. He wants you to succeed.

-----**"Releasing the Hostages"**

Sometimes we almost wish that G-d didn't have such a good memory.

One of the themes that are repeated throughout the Yom Kippur liturgy is "Don't remember our sins..." Who among us is prepared to be judged on the uncompromising basis of absolutely everything we have ever done and thought? Who among us is able to say to G-d, "I know that there is nothing that I have ever done wrong? I am proud of my every action (and inaction!) I have no regrets!"

As King Solomon writes, *"there is no righteous person in the world who does only good, and never sins."* (Ecclesiastes, 7:20)

Unlike the Christian paradigm, Judaism teaches that there is no one who can take the punishment for our sins. We are each responsible for our own actions. So how can we hope to be granted all the good things we pray for?

"Yom Kippur" means "Day of Atonement." The way we atone for our sins is by admitting our own shortcomings and making a sincere commitment to improve. G-d forgets nothing. What He does is recognize our human frailties and our desire to change.

What we are actually asking for on Yom Kippur is Divine Patience. One of the best ways to receive patience is to give it.

How patient are we with our fellow human beings? Do we look for opportunities to mend our relationships? Are we prepared to look past the misdeeds of the past and start anew? Or do we harbor the memories of old insults, prepared to bring them up at an opportune moment?

It is very difficult to maintain a relationship with people who continue to harp on the past. It is frustrating to try to push forward to tomorrow when the other party is pulling back to yesterday. Whether it is a casual or working relationship, or even (or especially!) in a close, loving relationship, we tend to cling to

our grievances, refusing to "release the hostages." Even years later, we have to brace ourselves for, "...and what about the time that you...?!" And we wonder, "Hey, didn't I apologize for that about 10 years ago?!"

Many people can't get past blaming their teachers and parents for everything that was done wrong in their youth. This is not to say that these are not necessarily valid objections. Real misconduct causes real pain and real damage. The question is, do we hold onto the resentment, or do we try to get past it and build from here? There is a certain peace of mind that comes from cleaning the dirty laundry and starting fresh.

We ask G-d to overlook our past mistakes. Shouldn't we show G-d that we are willing to do for others that which we ask Him to do for us?

This does not mean that we have to become a doormat. Nowhere does it say that we have to allow ourselves to be trampled upon by people who continue to abuse us. ("Yeah, I know I declared bankruptcy to get out of paying you five thousand dollars. But the bankruptcy court AND Yom Kippur have given me a clean slate... By the way, can I borrow another 5 G's?")

However, if someone legitimately wants to start over, (or, for that matter, if they are not here/living, and able to apologize) should we not attempt to be gracious and give them the benefit of the doubt? Isn't that what we ask G-d to do for us? How many of us would withstand G-d's scrutiny if He used the unforgiving standards that some of us apply to others??

There is a beautiful prayer that many people say before Yom Kippur. What we basically do is state that we forgive any and all people who have hurt us in any way. We make the obvious exception of those who intend to continue to hurt us -- no forgiveness for Al-Qaida -- as well as the understanding that those who hurt us financially still owe us the money. In addition, we ask G-d to inspire those whom WE have hurt to forgive us as well.

The recent September 11 commemorations should remind us is that time is life and life is precious. Many people on that fateful morning had time to call and say goodbye. Many did not.

Life is too short to waste on petty (and sometimes even not-so-petty) squabbles. Every day should be Yom Kippur. It's never too early to say, "I'm sorry. Please forgive me." It's never too early to say, "I forgive you." It's never too early to say, "I love you."

I humbly request of any of you whom I may have hurt in any way that you forgive me. It's easy when you sit in front of a computer to type out pronouncements and not realize that something may be offensive to some anonymous reader out there.

I wish you all a "*G'mar Chasima Tova*." May G-d seal us all in the Book of Life, Health, Joy, Prosperity, and Peace.

I love you.

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