

Kol Nidre 5779
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Weight Loss Lessons

A hallmark of the Yom Kippur liturgy is the vidui, the Al Chet litany that we recite multiple times during this holiest of days.

ועל חטא שחטאנו לפניך באנס ובכזון:

We have sinned against you unwillingly and willingly.

על חטא שחטאנו לפניך באמוץ הלב:

And we have sinned against You through hardening our hearts

The vidui is in the plural. Collectively we have all missed the mark this year. Thankfully we have this process called teshuva, and we are encouraged to make the wrongs right.

What happens when we constantly miss the mark, year after year?

And what happens to us each year when we come to this vidui, this confessional prayer, and we beat ourselves up and say next year will be better, but we continue down the same old same old path?

- *We have sinned against you by resorting to violence*
- *We have sinned against you by clever cynicism*
- *We have sinned against you through sexual immorality*
- *We have sinned again you through stubbornness*
- *We have sinned against your through gossip.*
- *We have sinned against you through empty promises*

The one line that got me year after year after year, the one line I would say on Yom Kippur, while fasting and hoped that this next year would be better was

לפניך שחטאנו חטא ועל
ובמזשת במאכל:

And we have sinned against You, we have missed the mark in our eating and drinking.

On the day when Jewish people collectively don't eat or drink, I would acknowledge how we all missed the mark with regard to what we place in our bodies through our mouths.

Short term, I would think about all the challah and mandle bread I had eaten at the seudah mafseket, the meal before Yom Kippur. Long term, I would pound my heart when I said the words "v'al chet" and be embarrassed at how I looked and felt because of how much I ate. I would beat myself up over all of the ice cream, large portions, fried foods and carbs and chocolate I had eaten over the last year and pledge to do better. But I never did any better. It would be a new year and the same refrain.

Until this past year.

Maimonides teaches “when keeping the body in health and vigor, one walks in the way of God.” I realized that by being overweight, I was not only letting myself down, and my daughter down, but I was letting God down too.

The way I was leading my life was an affront to God.

Something finally clicked.

And so, I joined Weight Watchers in August of 2017.

Founded in 1963 here in Queens, by a Jewish woman named Jean Nidetch, Weight Watchers changes its program every now and then, but its goal is to help men and women lose excess weight and get healthy. I am pretty certain I am not the only person in this room who has been on Weight Watchers at one point in their lives.

To people who see me, the most obvious change has been physical. There is less weight on my body--about sixty pounds, give or take. I look different than I did this time last Yom Kippur. And, I am really proud of that.

For over a year now I have been regularly attending Weight Watchers weekly meetings. Tonight, I want to share three pieces of wisdom I have learned from my Weight Watchers journey that have nothing to do with my own personal weight loss.

They actually are three pieces of wisdom that reflect the themes and the moods of this season of awe. The wisdom of Weight Watchers is in concert with the teachings of our sages and tradition.

The first message that I was reminded of this past year is that **nobody gets it right all the time. And our mistakes don't define us.**

If we peruse some of our major biblical characters, it is easy to notice how flawed so many were.

- Adam could not resist peer pressure--yet we celebrate him as the first human. This entire room could be filled with midrashim about him.
- Sarah let her husband sleep with another woman and then she hated her for it. And yet, she is our number one Matriarch. Sarah is frequently mentioned in our liturgy. To this day, we still name children after her.
- Rebecca was rather sneaky and manipulative when she needed to be, but that is not her legacy.
- Jacob was a master of the art of deception. And as a people, we are named after him.
- Reuben slept with his father's concubine. (Genesis 35:21) And he also helped in the Joseph narrative.
- Moses, *הַאֲדָמָה: עַל-פְּנֵי אִישׁ הָאָדָם מִכָּל מַאֲד [עֲנִיּוֹ]* the humblest man on the face of the earth (Numbers 12:13), had a very serious problem with his temper. He broke the tablets and hit the rock **and** he is the best-known Jewish leader in history.

- David concealed his adultery with murder (2 Samuel 11) and about him we sing דָּוִד מְלֶכֶּךָּ יִשְׂרָאֵל מְלֶכֶּךָּ *King David, the king of Israel lives forever*, and we ascribe the book of Psalms to him.
- And then there was his son Solomon, arguably one of history's greatest sex addicts. He built the Holy Temple.

We revere these biblical characters who sometimes missed the mark. Their errors did not define them. Their mistakes are not what elevated their statuses. Nobody is perfect. Or, as someone in this community told me recently, perfection is nothing more than a word in the dictionary.

If we move to the rabbinic period, we find a tractate of the Talmud all about Yom Kippur. This is how it begins:

מביתו גדול כהן מפרישין הכפורים יום קודם ימים שבעת
 פרהדרין ללשכת
 תחתיו אחר כהן לו ומתקינין
 פסול בו יארע שמא

MISHNA: Seven days prior to Yom Kippur the Sages would remove the High Priest, who performs the entire Yom Kippur service, from his house to the Chamber of Parhedrin, a room in the Temple designated specifically for the High Priest during that period. And they would designate another priest in his stead, the understudy Kohen Gadol, the understudy High Priest to replace him lest a disqualification arises due to impurity or another circumstance beyond his control prevent him from entering the Temple on Yom Kippur.

The Kohen Gadol, who's biggest day of the year was today, Yom Kippur, had an understudy ready in the wings in case circumstances made him *pasul*, inappropriate for his task today. We just don't get it right all the time.

During these Days of Awe, we acknowledge openly with others and with ourselves, that we have made mistakes and we ask others for forgiveness, in order to move on.

Weight Watchers users can utilize an app. If you use the app, you are able to see your weight journey. For the most part, my journey has been symbolized by a diagonal line that started high and is getting lower and lower. But, there have been bumps along the way. There have been weeks when I did not lose even an ounce. One week I gained two pounds! Was I upset? Sure. Did I double down my commitment the following week? Probably. Did I let it define me? No.

At Weight Watchers we observe our weight journey over the entire length of the time we are on the program, with the goal of getting to the maintenance phase (one day!) I can't think of a single person in my Tuesday morning meeting that has lost weight every single week and then stayed at their goal. Nobody gets it right all the time. And our mistakes don't define us.

Over this past year I have used the phrase "it's a marathon, not a sprint" a lot. I don't know the origin of the phrase. Maybe it was Dr Phil? Maybe it was

Drake. But I believe this phrase. A marathon takes significantly more time than a sprint. Hopefully our lives are all long 120 year marathons. I spent 40 odd years not quite getting it right. I was stuck at a long roadblock.

It is my hope that these first 40 odd years don't define me because of the second lesson I was reminded of this year from spending so much time in weekly Weight Watchers meetings and that is, *בו שׁיֵשׁ בְּמָה אֵלֶּא, בְּקַנְקַן תְּסַתְּכֵל אֶל*.

Rebbi says in Pirkei Avot (4:20) *Do not look at the jug or the vessel but rather at what is in it.*

Friends of mine got married a few weeks ago. It was a second wedding for both and it was a beautiful *simcha*. The love in the air was palpable. While I knew both the bride and the groom, I am closer with the groom. He and I have shared a number of life altering experiences.

One of those experiences took place about 4 years ago in Jerusalem. We were in Israel on an AIPAC Progressive Rabbis trip, and there was a war going on. Rockets from Gaza were being fired all over the south of Israel. A few times, rockets made it all the way to Jerusalem. We happened to be in a meeting in a sealed room in the Foreign Ministry Office when the Iron Dome Missile Defense system intercepted the rocket overhead and saved our lives.

For their wedding, I got them the ugliest mezuzah cover I think I have ever given anyone. But the Mezuzah has a story behind it. This Mezuzah was made from Iron Dome fragments. Israeli sculptor and blacksmith Yaron Bob, found his way of turning "swords into plowshares". He literally turns these fragments into pieces of art. While the mezuzah cover was hideous (in my opinion), it will physically hold sacred parchment inside and will remind the bride and groom of hope and the power of transformation.

בו שׁיֵשׁ בְּמָה אֵלֶּא, בְּקַנְקַן תְּסַתְּכֵל אֶל.

Do not look at the jug or the vessel but rather at what is in it.

As a society we do it too much. We need to curb the amount that we focus on external appearances. When we lost Aretha Franklin this year, what did nearly every single obituary make an effort to mention? The size of her body.

The best example of this lesson is cholent. Shabbat lunch cholent looks disgusting. But it is so delicious!

This past year as my size and shaped shrunk, people have often said to me "you look great." Thank you, but we are more than what we look like on the outside. I am still the same mother, wife, rabbi, teacher of Torah, daughter and friend--albeit a healthier version of myself. When we get to know people, Rabbi Tamar Elad Epplebaum writes, we should focus on the inner nature of both people and things. Let's move beyond looking at people's bodies and looking into their souls.

The third most important lesson I learned this year was the sheer power of an intentional community. The people in my Tuesday morning meetings are nice, but that is not the community I mean. A niche Facebook group was formed this year: female Conservative

rabbis doing Weight Watchers. These rabbis, these women have become my everything. We are in touch multiple times a day to lift each other up, to share heartache and success and kvetch.

These colleagues and I will all sing and chant today, on this holiest of days לך הַנְּשָׂמָה וְהַגּוֹרֵף פִּעֵלְךָ וְהַגּוֹרֵף. We know that our bodies are courtesy of God's handiwork. Who are we not to maintain our bodies as best as we can? Who are we to neglect them?

As my colleagues and I published in a Times of Israel article earlier this year, who else understands what it's like to navigate the intricacies of shul kiddush, while famished from three hours of leading services and "working the room," trying to feed our kids lunch before the lox is gone, while staying away from the whiskey that beckons and those brownies with the rich chocolate frosting?

Who else understands the unique stress of well meaning congregants who kindly drop off mishloach manot at shul and at home, brimming with homemade hamantashen — when we only have five pounds left until reaching our goal weight?

Who else understands the pull to stop into Starbucks for a Venti Caramel Frappuccino after officiating at a funeral — before picking up our child from daycare and needing to act "normal"?

Who else understands the stress eating that happens between Rosh Hashanah and Simchat Torah? And, between Purim and Pesach? And Chanukkah latkes and sufganiyot? Even Tu B'Shevat isn't safe with all those dried figs and grape juice. And then the cheesecake on Shavuot!

This group spans the country from New York to Los Angeles, from Florida to New England. We are carnivores and vegans. We are new rabbis, and we were ordained decades ago when JTS first opened its door to us. Some of us have a lot of pounds left to lose, and there are a few who are "lifetime" — and trying so hard to maintain their healthy BMI.

We all have a common goal: to gain control over the chaos of our lives by taking care of ourselves — in a profession which often calls for us to be selfless.

All of us aspire to be role models for our communities via ethics and rituals, and the halacha we believe in-- mandates that we take care of our bodies.

This holy community embodies the verse from Psalms (133) גַּם־אֶתִּים שְׂכַת וּמִה־נִּנְעִים מִה־טוֹב הַגֵּיהַ . It is so good and so pleasant for this community to dwell (online) together. Even though we are a social media group, we support each other more than any other community or group I have even been a part of. "Social connections, in a very real way, are keys to happiness and health," noted Dr. Jeremy Nobel, founder of the UnLonely Project and faculty member in primary care at Harvard Medical School. The connection that I have with these women, some who I never met in real life, is stronger than many other groups. These rabbis help me feel better about myself. Coretta Scott King famously said: the greatness of a

community is most accurately measured by the compassionate actions of its members. The compassion we have for each other is natural and real.

In Pirkei Avot, Hillel said: *הצבור מן תפרוש אל* "Do not separate yourself from the community". On this verse, the medieval Italian commentator, the Bartenura explained, that we should share in the troubles of the people in our community. The members of the female Conservative rabbis who are on Weight Watchers group overflow with *rachamim*, with compassion for its each other. We have been there for each other during death, illness, ends of an era, marriage, Pesach preparation, this month of Elul and the stress eating that may or may not have been associated with it. They have been right beside me as I drafted this sermon.

We no longer live in the shtetls or small villages where everything was within walking distance including extended family, the market, schools and businesses--but it feels like this group of women walk together every day.

We are a niche group, but we are an intentional group. If you are not yet part of a community like this, I encourage you to find one.

How did we find each other? One rabbi wrote something on Facebook about Weight Watchers around the time that Weight Watchers undertook a major change. Many of her friends that commented, happened to be rabbis and happened to be on the Weight Watchers program themselves.

That we openly commented on this subject was fairly odd, since there is a stigma about weight in our society, and unless your name is Oprah Winfrey, most people don't shout from the rooftops that they are on Weight Watchers---like I am doing tonight.

One of the rabbis wrote on that same thread that we should start a group for women rabbis on Weight Watchers. She then sent an email to the women's Conservative rabbi listserve, and the group was born.

Niolofer Merchant had a great article on the Ted Talks website, called *ideas.ted*, where he writes that the first step to finding people like yourself is to show up as yourself. I would add, your true self. We are raw and completely honest in our group.

Merchant writes that to find your people, you have to know how to *signal* your passions and interests and *seek* out theirs. In the article, he lays out 5 different communities that people can tap into-

- A group based on practice, that united by a common activity
- Proximity. This is a group based on being of or in a certain place
- A community of passion is driven by a shared interest in a particular subject (like other kosher vegans if that described you too)
- Providence. Provident communities are the product of seemingly random connections. The key lies in figuring out where and how you can create opportunities for serendipity.

- A community of purpose. Purposeful communities are those that share a vision of the world.

We are wired to desire connection with other people. If you feel alone, and cannot make heads or tails of how to get out there and meet people to connect with, guess what? You already did. The synagogue is a community of purpose and providence and passion and proximity and practice. Show up more. You will make friends. Whether you want to talk to God or talk to the person sitting next to you, this synagogue community is a holy place.

I realize that some of you may go home and say the rabbi spoke about her food journey on Kol Nidre! What kind of rabbi talks about food on Kol Nidre?

But that was not my goal.

In the Talmud we learn “Those who have the capacity to eliminate a wrong and do not do so, bear the responsibility for its consequences.” (Shabbat 54b). I have spent this last year eliminating a wrong. And I am not done yet. Not even close. Along the way, Baruch Hashem, I was reminded of three main lessons.

1. nobody gets it right all the time and our mistakes don't define us.
2. בו שׁיֵשׁ בְּמָה אֵלָּא, בְּקִנְיָן תִּסְתַּכֵּל אֵל. Don't look at the jug, rather what it is inside.
3. Being part of an intentional community can lift you up and make you a better person.

Perhaps these are lessons you could be reminded of us well.

Hopefully next year when I get to לְפָנֶיךָ שְׂחַטָּאנוּ חֲטָא וְעַל

וּבְמִשְׁתֵּי בְּמֵאֲכָל:

And we have sinned against You, we have missed the mark in our eating and drinking, I won't take it as personally, and just say the words like some of the others that don't apply to me, but probably apply to someone else in the room.

Gmar Chatima Tova.

To those who are able to fast, don't go overboard at the break fast tomorrow night.