



Yom Kippur 2011

“ANTHONY WEINER AND THE CHALLENGE OF CONFESSION” by Rabbi Peter Schweitzer

First came the damage-control counter attack when a particular congressman from Queens found it necessary to make the rounds on seven cable news shows.

Then came the deflection and attempt to blame the messenger. "My system was hacked. Pictures can be manipulated, pictures can be dropped in and inserted."

Then came the non-admission: "I can definitively say that I did not send this."

Then came the attempt at obfuscation and ambiguity when asked about the identification of a photo depicting a rather unambiguous part of anatomy: "You know, I can't say with certitude."

Then came the generic and clichéd series of confessions that might as well have been downloaded from Confessions R Us, if there were such a site.

"I haven't told the truth and have done things I deeply regret," "I brought pain to people I care about." "I have made terrible mistakes. I have hurt the people I care about the most and I am deeply sorry," "I have not been honest with myself, my family, my constituents, my friends, my supporters, and the media. I am deeply ashamed."

Now had he stopped here, he might have earned a modicum of respect, but then he threw in an unsolicited lawyerly-guided addendum that undermined his previous comment on bringing pain to others and reminded us that the one he cared about most was himself.

"I don't believe," he added, "that I did anything here that violates any law or violates my oath."

Next, he tried to re-direct the matter by offering up a self-interested denial of any dark and damning psychological drama.

"If you're looking for some kind of deep explanation, I simply don't have one," "This was just me doing a dumb thing, doing it repeatedly and then lying about it."

Of course, armchair therapists everywhere, including this social worker-trained rabbi, immediately started piling on the theories.

Meanwhile, he also offered a rather unique apology to his wife when he pre-emptively let her off the hook that only he intimated she was on.

“I make this apology to my neighbors and constituents, but I make it particularly to my wife Huma.” “My wife is a remarkable woman,” “She is not responsible for any of this.”

Fascinating. Who said she was? Or did he really hold a grudge that his wife was constantly on diplomatic missions with Hillary Clinton serving as her deputy chief of staff, which meant that he was left untended and if only she had been around he would not have indulged in acting-out behavior?

But even if she had been a “stay-at-home politician’s wife”, she did not feel obliged to stand by her husband like so many other disgraced and embarrassed politician’s partners, to send a message of unity that intimates, “If I can be here, how bad can this be?”

Yet because of her conspicuous “stand-by-me” absence – read: abandonment, which may have rankled her husband even more – he could still spin it the way he wanted and discount her presumed fury:

"She made it very clear that she thought what I did was very dumb and she was not happy about it, and she's very disappointed."

Dumb? Disappointed? This sounds to me more like the words of a scolding parent rather than a seething spouse.

“She also told me,” he said, “that she loved me and wanted us to pull through this.”

As if “this”, wrote one commentator, were an unpleasant hiccup on the rocky road of marriage.

Then he tried to employ the delay and stall game by announcing that he would seek treatment and wait for the return of his wife to decide on whether to resign or not. Once again, it had to do with his wife, and he, of course, couldn’t make this decision on his own, though he didn’t need to consult her about any of his twitter tweets.

Throughout all this denial, deflection, obfuscation, attack, admission, and cagey confession, there was one thing Anthony Weiner got right. He never, as far as I know, asked forgiveness and mercy from God. Score one point for that one.

Putting aside the context of the political arena, why is it so hard for people to take responsibility for their actions? Instead, we go into self-protection mode.

We accuse the other of taking a small misdemeanor and blowing it up into a major offense.

We play the “You Started It Game” and try to switch the blame around onto the injured party. “I only hit you because you snapped at me.” “I only shot her because she screamed at me.”

Or we offer a non-denial apology and then go on the offensive: “If I hurt your feelings, I’m sorry, but I think you’re over reacting.”

Or we pass the buck and blame it on our history and our addictions. “I’m sorry, I can’t always control my temper. I had a terrible youth. It wasn’t easy being abandoned as a child and then raised by wolves in a cave.”

Now being Jewish we have a special life-long relationship with guilt and while we are also supposedly adept at confessing our transgressions, we are also quite skilled at defending ourselves from guilt-feelings that we feel are unjustly imposed on us by others, notably, by certain family members who remind us at every occasion that we haven’t been attentive enough and what would it hurt to call home once in a while? Or that we’ll break our grandmother’s heart if ... and then you get to fill in the blank with any number of behavior choices that our open-minded grandmother might actually accept but that our less accepting parent can’t tolerate.

In this respect, Jews are at a disadvantage because we have trained ourselves to ignore certain accusations. A white noise machine immediately goes on in our head. We might offer up an apology, but unless we really internalize our guilt feelings, our “confessions” are utilitarian and not heart-felt.

Now of course one simple reason for denying responsibility is that we don’t want to get in trouble. We don’t want to get reprimanded, grounded, fined, suspended, fired, not to mention removed from office. But I think it goes deeper than how others will treat us. I think the hardest challenge is living with our own imperfections.

It is not about guilt, but about shame. Guilt means I did something wrong. Shame means there is something wrong about me. I am somehow flawed and I feel exposed.

We have been taught to say to children, “You did a bad thing,” not “You are a bad boy” or “You are a bad girl.” But I am more and more convinced that this psychologically and politically-correct rhetoric makes no difference. I think that feeling shame is innate and universal. No matter how successful we are at criticizing the action, not the person, I think we are hardwired to still end up being our own worst critics.

Now we may experience this feeling infrequently and only mildly and let ourselves off easily. Or we are capable of coming down really hard on ourselves and developing the idea that there is something faulty if not basically wrong at our core. This, in turn, can lead to depression and self-punishment, or to anger and acting-out behavior. And, of course, there is always denial.

Now in the wisdom of our Jewish culture, we have developed the idea that forgiveness is possible. That wrongs can be righted with acts of reparation and restitution.

But truly the biggest challenge is not repairing a relationship with others, important as that is, but repairing a relationship with ourselves. We are our own worst injured parties.

Borrowing from Rabbi Hillel, we might ask: “If I do not have flaws, how can I be human? If I can not forgive myself, who else can? If not now, when?”

In fact, the time is now, on Yom Kippur, a day of introspection and self-evaluation, a day of forgiveness and self-renewal.

Let us identify our imperfections and also affirm our self-worth.

Let us recognize our limitations and treat ourselves with kindness.

And let us treat others the same way.

Then, I believe, we can truly take responsibility, find forgiveness, and do our part to repairing the world.