



THE CITY CONGREGATION for HUMANISTIC JUDAISM

Yom Kippur 2013

**“SELF CONTROL”
by Rabbi Peter Schweitzer**

In 1896, my grandfather on my mother’s side emigrated to America from Vilna in Lithuania. He was 14-years old. Seven years later he graduated from the University of Chicago and earned what was then called a Bachelor of Philanthropy degree. This launched him into the field of charity work. At the time, the government did not supply services such as food, money or homes for people in need. This was all the work of charities.

Historically, poverty had been considered a disease, but a new generation of workers understood that individuals were not to blame nor should they be stigmatized. What was needed was social reform and government started playing an important role. My grandfather played an instrumental role in this new development. He was an early advocate of what would become aid to dependent women and children and through his position as superintendent of the United Jewish Charities in Kansas City, he helped created the Board of Public Welfare, the first of its kind in the country. The goal of these new, wide-ranging social services expanded well beyond almsgiving. The ultimate objective was to enable recipients to achieve as much self-sufficiency and responsibility as they could manage.

A more subtle agenda of the field was social control or the implementation of rules that would regulate individual and group behavior in an attempt to gain conformity, suppress undesirable activity like begging or sleeping on the sidewalks, and tamp down unrest and protest. Along with the police, social workers were employed as the agents of these efforts. Unwittingly, by becoming part of the system themselves, their own compassion for the disenfranchised and their own commitment to system change were often co-opted.

And then there is the power of religion. Sociologists argue that belief systems can exert an even greater control on human behavior than laws imposed by government. Religious communities demand their own conformity. And so, of course, does the fear of a wrathful God.

But what if your religious community is, let us say, flexible and lenient on these matters. And what if you don’t believe in an all-seeing all-knowing always-judging deity? And what if you don’t possibly fear the stern countenance of your rabbi with whom you are on a first-name basis?

Then it is mostly all about self-control and self-discipline, motivated solely from within. To be sure, family members and friends can exert influence and even help us along, but ultimately it is up to us how we will act or not act.

When Cain and Abel both brought offerings to God, God looked favorably on Abel's offering, but not on Cain's. So Cain was very angry and downcast. And the Lord said to Cain, "Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must rule over it."

What's remarkable about this passage is that God does not assume authority over Cain or threaten him, but instructs Cain to take authority over himself. Or as Freud might have put it, it is up to your superego to control your id.

This is precisely what Odysseus did when he and his sailors approached the island of the Sirens. He had the men tie him to the mast of the ship and they stuffed their own ears with beeswax. He wanted to hear the Sirens song but he knew he would not have the strength to resist its seductiveness. So he took preventative steps to guard himself.

In modern parlance, addiction groups guide their members to avoid people, places and things that will lead them astray. You're better off not sailing by the Sirens in the first place. Or bringing junk food into the house.

Long before AA, the rabbis taught a concept called "siyag l'torah", which means putting a fence around the Torah. In order to avoid breaking specific laws, like turning on a light on Shabbat, they created another law – not to touch the light in the first place – which acts as a barrier to breaking the real prohibition.

Temptation is always there, often offering us momentary pleasures that we'll soon come to regret. Opportunity is also always there, to make better choices, to undo bad habits, to practice self-mastery, to do what is right.

The system is also rigged for us to make mistakes. This is how we were built. We were born not in a state of original sin but of infinite fallibility.

The real challenge is how we recover from our missteps and start afresh.

The real challenge is not to beat up on ourselves for succumbing to temptation and then, feeling defeated and beyond hope, succumb some more.

The real challenge is to believe we can do it. We'll never climb a mountain if we decide at the outset that it is insurmountable. But if we set small goals, if we look for tiny gains, then others will follow.

In the rabbinic text Pirke Avot, known as Ethics of the Sages, we read (4:2): "Mitzvah goreret mitzvah" - one good deed will bring another."

This can happen in two ways, say the commentators.

First, we develop new habits. We essentially re-program ourselves to a new set of choices of action. The feedback loop reinforces this behavior and we will repeat it again and again.

But just as important, our best behavior, our best deeds, can bring out imitation from others. We can be the inspiration, the models for how others act, because of how we act.

Weight Watchers and Alcoholics Anonymous work, in part, because they are mutual-aid organizations. The members are inspired by each other and also turn to each other for support when they are faltering.

Religious organizations offer the same connections and assistance. In traditional Jewish practice, certain prayers cannot be recited without a *minyan*, a quorum of ten worshippers, once only men, but now, at least in non-Orthodox circles, women too. Putting aside the archaic and on-going sexism of this practice, the important idea was that certain prayers could not be accomplished on one's own, but only with the formation of a community.

Today, on Yom Kippur, we will create our own community. And, furthermore, we will observe the traditional practice of reciting the list of our shortcomings and wrongdoings not as individuals, but together, collectively, in one voice. Surely, we do not need to own all these offenses personally, but we lend strength and support to each other when we say them together.

Shanah Tovah.