



Rabbi Jeffrey Saxe
Yom Kippur 5776/2015
Habits

A poem by William Carlos Williams:

I have eaten
the plums
that were in
the icebox

and which
you were probably
saving
for breakfast

Forgive me
they were delicious
so sweet
and so cold

This relatively famous poem is entitled, "This Is Just to Say." It raises many intriguing questions, as we imagine the narrator writing this note after eating his wife's breakfast from the icebox: Is it an apology? Or just an admission? Do we hear regret in his voice, or is his guilt outweighed by the pleasure of the taste, still on his tongue?

And more questions: what was going on in his mind as he opened the icebox, saw the plums and ate them? Did he take out a plate and a napkin, or did he just stand there by the icebox and gulp down the fruit in a trance? Did he make a conscious

choice, to steal this pleasure from his wife? Or maybe he couldn't help it as soon as he saw the fruit? Perhaps this isn't the first time, and his wife won't be surprised. It could be that he leaves a note like this for her every night.

As Yom Kippur approaches, many Jews go around to friends and family and ask forgiveness. Perhaps there is something hurtful they know they have done – words spoken in anger and never taken back, an act of selfishness that, months later, they can't believe they committed. Or maybe they are hoping that if they've done something unknowingly, their friend will tell them so they can apologize and repair hurt feelings.

This is a good approach that all of us could make a part of our practice. But when I stand at the pond for *Tashlich* every Rosh Hashanah, casting my sins into the water, those aren't the sins I search for. More than any single act or another, I am inclined to focus on my modes and dispositions. For me, Yom Kippur isn't about momentary lapses and transgressions, but more about patterns, like how we act in almost any situation. It's about the things that happen despite ourselves, like when this man saw his wife's breakfast staring at him from the icebox. The things we respond to almost automatically, always in the same way, and maybe even without our awareness. It's about the many things we do every day, not out of a fully conscious decision, but out of something else we refer to as habit.

The great sage, the Vilna Ga'on, said, "The entire purpose of our existence is to overcome our negative habits." To give us a perspective on modern behavior, it's been estimated that 45 percent of our everyday decisions are habitual. Think about that: almost half our actions over the last year. Many of these we can name: the morning routine of showering and getting ready; the same breakfast we eat every day; kissing a loved one goodbye; driving to work. At night, going to bed and maybe watching some TV; and countless things in between.

But the Vilna Ga'on understood that it's more than the routines we've established. It's the many actions and reactions we have, that people who know us could predict like a clock – what we'll order in a restaurant; things we say over and

over; the ways we respond to the world; the quick yes, or no; the compliment, or criticism, the act of help, or the split second decision not to bother.

As Aristotle said, “We are what we repeatedly do.” And it is so true: as we do the same things again and again, they eventually come to define who we are. There is a story about Mohini, a rare, white tiger who was given to President Eisenhower as a gift. Mohini was kept in a 12-foot cage for many years and spent her days pacing back and forth. When the tiger was finally brought to a new habitat built just for her, everyone expected her to be overjoyed, to jump out, sprint up the hill and climb the trees. But Mohini spent the rest of her life pacing back and forth over a 12-foot area that she set for herself right after she got out of the cage. When we’ve been doing the same thing for that long, sometimes that’s the only thing we can think of to do.

Our early sages believed in habits as well: that if you engaged in one good act, or followed a commandment, it was more likely that you’d follow it up with another, as the teaching goes, “*Mitzvah Goreret Mitzvah, A mitzvah will bring another mitzvah*”.

In the Torah, one is commanded to leave any grain he has missed during the harvest, for the needy to pick for themselves. Can you imagine this? Families, kids, people who are hungry being able to pick fresh vegetables for themselves without any shame? But I see an equally important impact this commandment has, on the biblical farmer himself – with each stroke of the sickle, watching ears of grain fall out of his grasp and down to the ground, reminding him that the land belongs to the community. How might this habit affect him in other aspects of his life? Will he be quicker to offer his share of *tzedakah* to the community, or to invite a stranger into his home? What other habits of humility and generosity will come out of the habit the law has given him during the harvest? How do your habits, and the things you do with your time, inform the way you see the world?

Why are we so dependent on our habits? How do they work? And what can we do to change them? There are good reasons we cling to habits. They’re an important part of how our minds function. Scientists have recently learned that when we are engaged in one, our brain activity is much lower. We’re not learning or making new

decisions. Our brains love efficiency, so we are wired to create as many habits as we can. Then our brains can rest, or do more things at once. And, some habits, as we practice them, help us do things better and better, until we are throwing pitches at 90 miles an hour. Actually, without the brain's ability to form activities into habits, we'd be a mess all of the time, having to pay attention to everything we do, from driving, to walking, to writing and getting dressed, as if we were doing it for the first time.

Some habits are great. But the brain's preference for habits also means that it forms them even when we don't want it to, taking behaviors that we wish were one-time mistakes and hard-wiring them into our personalities. We are left with things we would rather not do, or are not even aware we do, but we do them out of habit. Any of us could name a long list: leaving dishes in the sink or biting our nails. Or, more importantly, things we do that hurt our effectiveness and our relationships: responding defensively to new ideas; being late; competing for attention; making promises we can't keep. These too are habits: ways we have learned to handle situations, that after a while, we do automatically.

In a book called *The Power of Habit*, Charles Duhigg says that right now, we're in a kind of Golden Age when it comes to understanding habits. Thanks to some new discoveries, we know more about how they work and how we can change them. We're used to obsessing about the actions we take. But Duhigg tells us the action is only one of three parts of a habit. It may be the most important in terms of results, but the other two are the ones we need to understand if we want to make a change. They are: the trigger that happens before we act, and the reward we get afterwards.

We've all seen couples argue about the habit of looking at one's phone every few moments, for no good reason. I know a man who decided to end a budding friendship he had begun because every time he sat with this person, it was like he wasn't there. The friend was always texting or checking his emails. But it's hard to stop doing that just by telling yourself to stop. To get control of this habit, you'd have to find what it is that prompts you to take out your phone, and what you get out of it. Then,

you can replace the action you take with something else that will still give you a similar reward.

In looking at Alcoholics Anonymous, researchers figured out one of the keys to their success: in addition to the element of chemical dependency, the rewards many alcoholics seek when they drink are companionship, escape and relief from stress. When they experience that craving, which is their trigger, they can get the same reward by calling their sponsor or going to a group gathering, without using alcohol.

Can you think of a negative habit you have, that you could experiment with, using this new technique? As you contemplate this question, I imagine some of you also might be thinking about habits that belong to a person sitting next to you, or someone else you are close with in your life. That too is a natural habit of ours. But you really can't think of another person's behavior, because we can't be the change agent for someone else's habit. Only each of us ourselves can do that. That's because there's one more crucial element in breaking a habit: *you yourself* have to become aware of the habit, and aware of how it conflicts with the way you want to be. You have to be ready to decide to make the change.

A friend told me a story about how her life was transformed when she was 14. She was an unhappy kid and didn't know why. She responded unenthusiastically to everything she was expected to do, at school or with her family. Some of you with teenagers might recognize this habit. Every time an activity was suggested, if she said, "How boring," or, "Whatever," she got agreement from her friends, or annoyance from her parents.

Then she went to summer camp for the first time. She made a friend, who was always happy and approached everything with joy. She tried a few 'Whatever's, and her friend didn't respond. Then, she realized that if she made herself embrace what was going on, her friend joined her, and she had a great time. She could flip her behavior 180 degrees, get to hang out with her friend, and enjoy herself. She made an internal decision in that moment, and she tells me she never looked back. That summer made

her a different person. As an adult, she looks at difficult situations in a positive way. It's improved her life greatly.

This woman was lucky when she was a kid – she went to camp. But I'm not just advertising for Jewish camps. Camp is a place that takes you out of the pressures of everyday life. It helps you act more like your true self, and see more clearly who you want to be. In our daily lives, we develop habitual ways of acting and seeing the world that take us away from who we are, whether we are kids or adults. What helps us see ourselves clearly? What helps us feel ready to change?

A day like Yom Kippur can be that kind of a moment for us. We stop everything and try to envision ourselves being the kind of person we want to be. Yom Kippur is not about the way you brush your teeth or turn your pillow over before you go to sleep. But it *is* about the many habits, little and big, that make up who we are.

The questions I am suggesting we ask ourselves are these: do our habits reflect who we want to be? Do they echo our deepest values? Do we show love to the people who are most important to us? Do we respond to a stranger in a way that mirrors how we would want to be treated? Do we spend our free time doing and thinking about the things that we value most?

As we read the silent confession, sing Ashamnu, and say the *Al Cheit's*, we can see it as an attempt to bring all of our habits into the light. Judaism calls this process *Cheshbon Hanefesh*, or accounting of the soul. We pinpoint every aspect of life that we can think of together, hoping each of us will see our patterns and behaviors with a new awareness and be moved to make that simple and subtle step: a decision to change. Maybe we're ready to change this one thing we do, the thing we think about every year at this time, or the small thing we haven't even been conscious of, but as we sit here, it now seems so obvious.

I think of Mahatma Gandhi as a person who sought to live his values at every moment. In this quote, he captured how everything we do and say adds up to who we are: "Your beliefs become your thoughts, Your thoughts become your words, Your

words become your actions, Your actions become your habits, Your habits become your values, Your values become your destiny.”¹

Yom Kippur, and really any moment that we allow it to happen, is a time to look at our thoughts, words, actions, habits and values. It’s a chance to see if this is when we’re ready to address one small thing, or one big thing. If our response, like the plums in the icebox, can change from saying, “This is just to say,” to saying, “Next time, I want this to be different.”

¹ Gandhi’s source is a Chinese proverb.