

Rabbi Brad Bloom

Yom Kippur Day Sermon - 2013

Since today is about confessions, how would you judge me if I confessed that I get a thrill out of watching my favorite professional football team's defensive players crash into the body and sack the opposing team's quarterback? Supposed I confessed that I loved watching a good boxing match, as my favorite boxer pummels the face of his opponent? Or what would be your judgment if I confessed that I feel something like joy watching an elected official being indicted on corruption charges and led off to jail? Finally what if, in the privacy of my home, I snickered with satisfaction at the news that a rabbi I know and dislike had lost his job?

What is it about us that we like to see other people suffer or fail? In sports at least we can rationalize the long term effects of brutal head concussions in football and professional boxing by referring to the rules of the game and the huge salaries professional athletes earn. Those aspects somehow cut down the guilt factor as we relish watching someone tear apart another person in sports. Of course, politics can be just as rough as contact sports, bringing out visceral emotions in all of us. But why do we sometimes gloat or exclaim in enthusiasm when others whom we know personally and with whom we have had disagreements in the past, come upon back luck or get into trouble? Some would respond, "There is justice in their comeuppance." Yet, somewhere should there not be a moral boundary inside our minds that raises a red flag when we privately rub it in or rejoice at the misfortunes of others?

There are people who feel exhilaration over the misfortune or suffering that comes upon others, whether or not they are guilty of any misdeeds. Some say this kind of attitude reflects a personality disorder, while other experts claim it could easily be a moral and even a spiritual malaise. A text from Ethics of the Fathers says; "Judge every person by giving them the benefit of the doubt." If only we all could practice this value, but that seems naïve, and especially if we watch cable news which churns out negativity about people and their failings 24 hours a day.

Yom Kippur asks us to be honest with ourselves and examine our actions. It means confessing not only deeds but intentions and destructive thoughts too. I believe it is natural to get a kick out of the misfortunes of an adversary, but that does not mean one has to indulge such feelings either. Remember there is a difference between having the feeling and letting it overcome us. The world today feels like we are living in a reality TV show of gotcha moments, where people get a perverse kind of cheap thrill when reports circulate in a community that someone allegedly said something stupid in public or embarrassing and we jump upon the bandwagon to cheer on that person's shame. How can we possibly build a humane and respectful society when the trend today, especially in the media, is one of incessant and malicious chatter?

Part of the answer to this question often comes from deep seated envy. This is an emotion we repress and few of us will admit to it or talk about it. Yet, I believe envy is a human emotion that underlies much of what brings out the desire and emotions that propels people to secretly crave the sad and tragic events in other people's lives. Judaism has a lot to say about envy and Yom Kippur is a good

time to look inward to recall instances when envy led us to act on destructive emotions and confess when it played out in our reactions to people whose misfortune we may have exploited.

The Bible gives us examples of characters who may have acted out of envy, and who often ended up in disastrous situations. In the Torah, for example, think about the possibility that envy might have been the reason that Cain slew Abel. Could it also have been the reason why Sarah expelled Hagar into the desert, along with her son Ishmael, whom she had with Abraham before Isaac was born? Was envy part of the underlying emotions that filled the hearts of Joseph's brothers, and which led them to cast the favorite son of Jacob into the pit and sell him into slavery? Later on, in the book of Numbers, regarding the Levite Korach -- who challenged Moses' role as prophet -- was he also fueled by envy, believing he should have been leader of the people?

The most tragic story of envy was that of King Saul, who, even though he practically adopted the shepherd boy David into his home and promised him to one of his own daughters, envied and hated him so much that he spent the latter part of reign chasing and trying to kill him. David brings back victory after victory for Saul against the Philistines, and each time the people become more enthralled with David. Saul, however, reacts only with hostility and envy because he cannot garner that kind of popular support. Even his own son Jonathan turns against him, refusing, contrary to his father's orders, to kill David. Saul knows, according to the prophet Samuel that the Lord has determined that he is not fit to be king and his line will not continue on as kings of Israel. This only exacerbates Saul's obsession to see David fail and to kill him.

In the end of First Samuel it is Saul who falls in battle on Mount Hermon, and who subsequently kills himself. It is a tragic ending to a tragic story of the first king of Israel who allowed his unbridled envy of David to rule his emotions to the point where it destroyed him. My take on Saul is that he struggled with his emotions. He knew what he was feeling was wrong. He just couldn't get over the prophecy of Samuel that he would not remain as king and that David would be his successor. He knew that David had all the right qualities he did not have and that in part explains why he almost took pleasure in the chase and ultimate goal of destroying the young David.

This might also explain why people succumb to this emotion and how they end up deriving pleasure when others fail. There is even a word in German for people who enjoy watching other people's misfortune, a word that has started to come into English usage, the word is Schadenfreude.

In a recent news story on this word, a reporter tells the following story:
 "A man I know won the lottery, and another acquaintance couldn't believe it. "But he's such a loser," he said.

"He nailed this one."

"How much?"

I didn't know, but people said it was a tidy sum, enough to bring a smile to the lips of anyone's bank manager.

“He doesn’t have a bank manager,” the acquaintance said bitterly. “I doubt if he has a fixed address.”

“Hey, settle down. You hardly know the guy.”

He did settle down, but became morose.

“He makes me sick,” he said darkly.

Maybe it’s the parents who are telling about how their child got into the best college when your child is attending a community college. Or is it the feeling when one of your siblings has significant financial success in business that exceeds anything you have ever achieved and instead of feeling good or proud of them all you can feel is envy. So when something happens down the road which is a misfortune like poor health or a loss of income, you feel a secret sense of satisfaction which you can never say out loud but the feelings are right there. These are all examples of potential situations where one experiences Schadenfreude.

Social Scientists think that people feel this way because research indicates that when people we know have bad luck we look better to ourselves, and that people with low self esteem are more likely to have Schadenfreude than those with high self esteem. And finally, it should come as no surprise that research also has demonstrated that Schadenfreude is pronounced with people in the field of politics.

Yet having said all this, we come to a verse in Proverbs the 24th chapter verse 17 which says, “Rejoice not when your enemy falls, and let not your heart be glad when he stumbles.” The sages of the Hebrew Scriptures knew this emotion to be part of the human condition, even in ancient times, and warned us to restrain ourselves from indulging in such feelings. I am adding to this Proverb not only “our enemy” but ‘our closest friends and relatives’ as well.

The truth is that people tend to be careful in public by camouflaging their comments in social circumstances when hearing about someone’s misfortune. I have heard it too many times when someone will start to jump to conclusions and offer opinions not based upon facts and delve into details that are simply too personal and inappropriate. They do not imagine that they might be enjoying themselves but they are, and when we step back for a moment and think about it; they seem to be overly engaged not in the sadness aspect but subtly commenting that the person almost deserved what happened to them. It may not simply be about envy, but it could reflect something in themselves and something in their own lives, and that might explain why they get involved so deeply in other people’s personal business and especially their problems.

Judaism has a lot to say about how often these kinds of thoughts, as I mentioned earlier, which begin in our minds often come out in our casual conversations with others. There are even different categories in Jewish law like *rechilut* (gossip) or *l’shon hara* (slander). The sages teach us that not only is the person who spreads information about

another that is damaging, even if it is true, committing a transgression, but those who listen to it are equally guilty of sinning. People who derive a secret pleasure from manipulating information infect everyone around them with the sin of their own actions.

Our Mahzor contains plenty of *al chet* sins that acknowledge the different ways we hurt others and ourselves, and we read about these sins last night and this morning. They include the sin of gossip, evil speech, the evil inclination, distorting the facts about others, deceiving others and ourselves with half truths and denying responsibility for our own misfortunes. These all relate in different ways to the subject of envy and to the need for people to derive power and affirmation when they see an opportunity to take advantage of another person. In the afternoon service there is one *al chet* that captures it best, which says, “We have indulged in despair and trafficked with cynics.” This one sums it all up. It is not just us but it is about a trend in our society that draws us to the failings rather than to the best in people. And as a result we risk the final transgression in this litany of transgressions which says, “We have sinned against ourselves and have not lived up to the best in ourselves.”

That is exactly what Yom Kippur is all about, which is to discover at the end of the day the best in ourselves. All of our fasting and repentance is aimed towards achieving a spiritual cleansing. The possibility of renewal in each person is the hope that we are taught God harbors for each of us. The question is, Are we ready to heed that message?

I suppose after delivering this sermon I’ll have to be more restrained in my emotions when I watch football in the future, as well as the next time when I see a politician carted off to jail for corruption. Rest assured, I have given thought to those few in my career who have hurt me, or those whom I have envied with regard to harboring those thoughts I have described today and how I would rather now jettison them from my mind. Because to live that kind of ongoing animosity and or to relish someone else’s misfortune only brings an insatiable and unquenchable thirst for more of it. That is simply intolerable in the long run.

Where did we learn to reject this kind of behavior in Judaism? Could it have been in a story in the midrash about the Exodus when the Israelites crossed through the Sea of Reeds and watched as God drowned the Egyptian soldiers as God converged the waters over them and saved our people. The angels cheered at their demise, until God called out to them saying, “How can you celebrate their deaths for are they not My children too?” Even the angels on high were susceptible to this frailty of human emotions.

May this sacred day, the holiest of days, teach us to restrain our emotions, strive for humility, subdue our pride, lessen our envy and judge people for the best in themselves.