GOD LOVES US ANYWAY
Rabbi Daniel J. Moskovitz – High Holy Day Sermon 5764

A man calls his mother in Florida. "Mom, how are you?"
"Not too good," says the mother. "I've been very weak."
The son says, "Why are you so weak?"
She says, "Because I haven't eaten in 38 days."
The man says, "That's terrible. Why haven't you eaten in 38 days?"
The mother answers, "Because I didn't want my mouth to be filled with food if you should call."

How many Jewish mothers does it take to change a light bulb?
OY! Don't bother, I'll sit in the dark, I don't want to be a nuisance to anybody.

What is it about Jews and guilt? What is it about our people, our culture, our tradition that makes guilt pain us just like the hypothetical knife our mother's keep telling us we are stabbing through their hearts? Guilt is a powerful force in the Jewish people, perhaps even more powerful than God's parting of the Red Sea. I mean, we don't normally have 5,000 people at Shabbat services; I am going to go out on a limb here and say guilt may have a little something to do with our need for extra seating.

What is the Jewish perspective on guilt? Is guilt good or bad for you? Is it possible to feel too much guilt? How can we differentiate between the positive feelings of remorse that lead us to *Teshuva,* the act of repentance that is our focus on these High Holy Days, and that incapacitating, negative guilt, which diminishes our sense of self, causes us to look in the mirror, and believe all those things we are telling ourselves? That kind of guilt, Jewish or not, becomes self manufacturing: we feel guilty for feeling guilty, and then of course we just feel more guilty. Is Jewish guilt good for the Jews?

When my father taught me how to drive, he took me to the parking lot of a super market on an early Sunday morning, in my mom's Ford Escort station wagon, and he

explained the finer points of how to actually drive a car; to this point all I had had was classroom instruction. He explained how to check my mirrors, where to place my hands on the wheel, how to use my turn signal and sometimes hand signals to be sure changing lanes was safe, and then he said something to me, something I obviously still remember to this day. He said, "do as I say and not as I do." Made perfect sense at the time, probably good advice for a 15 year old with a learner's permit, but upon reflection, he set me up for failure, to feel guilty about making the same careless mistakes in driving that we all make.

I got my license a few weeks later and within two weeks I had gotten a speeding ticket on a city street. I remember crying to the police officer who was giving me a ticket, "my parents are going to be so disappointed in me, they're going to be so mad." I came home and presented my dad with my license and set of keys, we had agreed that if I got a ticket I would lose driving privileges for a month. I was shaking as I handed it to him, that uncontrolled one leg shake that kids get when they are really terrified, kinda like when you pet a dog and the back leg starts to get going, that was me, but no petting. I said, "Dad I am sorry, I screwed up, you can have my license. I never want to drive again." He took the license and the keys and then said the most amazing thing, "Its OK, everyone gets a ticket now and then." In an instant I didn't feel guilty anymore, I felt acceptance, for who among us has never made a mistake in driving? We try so hard to do as they say, as they teach us as we are instructed – parents, teachers, bosses, rabbis – they are all saying, "do as I say not as I do," but we are human beings, we are only human, we can only try our best, we will never be perfect. Life is a lot more like baseball, where if you get a hit 3 out of 10 times you get into the hall of fame, than it is a spelling bee,

where the only word that counts is the last one you couldn't spell. Reminds me of the Garrison Keillor line, about his hometown, where every student was above average. It's not possible.

Jewish guilt has its genesis in, of all places, the book of Genesis, specifically the story of Adam and Eve and the Garden of Eden, which occurs in chapter three of the Torah. Which, by the way, means we were only guilt free for about two chapters. Oh, to have lived during those two chapters, what a *m'chyah* it must have been!

In the story of creation that precedes Adam and Eve by five days, God makes order out of chaos. God creates plants and animals and all aspects of nature, then as God's crowning achievement, God creates human beings in God's own image, to rule over the plants and animals. God gives human beings, Adam and Eve, one rule to live by and a consequence for breaking that rule. God commands that Adam and Eve are not to eat of the tree of knowledge, for on the day they eat of it they will die.

One rule to live by, do anything else you want, don't break that one rule and your life is perfect in the eyes of God. What do Adam and Eve do? They break the rule. Sure, Adam blames Eve, and Eve blames the serpent, But God holds them both responsible. They are punished and are told that they will have to work the fields, and that only by the sweat of their brow will their labor produce food. They are told that they will crave relations with each other, they will desire to be parents and raise children, but that this process will be fraught with challenge and difficulty and pain. And they are told that they are mortal, that unlike any other of God's creatures they will live with the knowledge that life is finite, that one day they will die. The implication is that God is angry at them and doesn't love them anymore.

In both the Jewish and Christian understanding of the story, human beings are conditioned to think that they are intended to live sin free lives, perfect lives; we feel immense guilt when we are not able to meet those expectations. Even if we silently acknowledge that no one is perfect, that we can only try our best, we still feel guilty because we are not able to be more perfect than we are. We can't call our mothers every day, but we still feel guilt over not calling them more often.

Rabbi Harold Kushner, in his book, "How Good Do We Have To Be?" suggests another way of looking at the story of Adam and Eve. Kushner reads it not as a story of Paradise Lost but rather of Paradise Outgrown, not of Original Sin, but of the Birth of Conscience. We cannot live in paradise all our lives, to live life we have to experience life, and that means we will make mistakes, because the world is a complicated, complex place and we can't always get it right. It is not as simple as following the rules, because sometimes the rules of life are in competition with each other, and this is the source of our guilt.

The rules of life say that we have to work hard to provide for our family, but working hard also means long hours and business travel and that leads to time away from our family. The harder we work the more we provide and also the less time we have with the one's we love. We want to love and be loved by others, our spouse, our siblings, our children, our friends, so we open our hearts to them, we let them in very close, and make ourselves vulnerable to the wounds that only those closest to us can inflict upon us. We struggle to find a balance between too much and not enough, a safe distance away and a safe distance near.

The punishments of the Garden of Eden – work, relationships, and the knowledge that our time on earth is fleeting – may be the greatest source of our feelings of guilt, but they are also the very things that make life worth living, as they are the very things that give life meaning. That our labor and our work will produce something of value, that our relationships with others will have meaning and substance, and that our life, which we know to be finite, will in the end have amounted to something, that's the meaning of life.

The question is not will we make mistakes, as parents, as professionals, as a husband, a wife, a son, a daughter. Of course we will, we will get some important things wrong from time to time and feel terrible about it. Anyone who takes the moral demands of a human life seriously will make mistakes. The question is how shall we deal with our imperfection, our sense of inadequacy? How do you relieve guilt? How do you cure shame?

I suggest to you today that Judaism is not a cause of our guilt, our feelings of inadequacy, of shame, for that is the nature of being human, it comes with the complex decisions we have to make everyday, the constant trade offs and compromises we must make just to survive, to live by as many of the rules as possible. Rather Judaism, properly understood and applied, is the *cure* for feelings of guilt and shame that accompany those trade-offs and shortcomings. The Jewish response is not, "Why did we do that which we were not supposed to do?" The answers for that are no more complicated than why we sometimes speed and sometimes change lanes without signaling. Rather, the Jewish response, is, "What do we do with the feelings of guilt and shame and inadequacy that come with having disappointed God, our spouse, our children,

our boss, our friend, ourselves?" Where do we bring our broken souls to have them mended?

In the short time I have been a Rabbi I have had the opportunity to come to know a number of people who are members of 12-step programs. Most have been young couples whose marriages I have been honored to officiate at. In the course of studying with these couples and getting to know them, I asked them, as I do with all my couples, what was the most inspiring religious experience you have ever had? They would tell me that it took place not in the temple sanctuary, but at the gatherings that often take place in the shadow of the sanctuary, in the classrooms and social halls late at night or early in the morning, at AA meetings or some other 12-step program. There was something authentically religious that happened to them there. I asked them if they could help me understand what it was that was so spiritually meaningful so helpful to them in those meetings and they would all answer with the same word, 'acceptance.' The message they so often heard in temple was that everything they did wrong separated them from God and those they loved, but what they heard in those meetings was, "I'm not OK, and you're not OK, but that's OK. We have all been there and we love you anyway." The group offered them not shared strength but shared weakness, the redeeming knowledge that other people – nice, honorable, attractive people – were struggling with the same demons and challenges we all face. What these groups offered and what Judaism offers all of us on these days of atonement is the reassurance that if we drop our pretensions and excuses and stand before God naked and vulnerable, if we admit our failures as the first step toward doing something about them, God will not reject us as a flawed creation, God will not look at our nakedness and vulnerability and laugh at us or chastise us, but the

words of our mouths and the meditations of our heart will be acceptable in God's sight. God loves us anyway.

On these High Holy Days two voices are heard in the words of our prayers, they are the two attributes of God that sit upon the throne and watch over us not only on these days, but all the days of our lives, the God of Judgment/*Din* and the God of Compassion/*Rachamim*. We need both in our lives. We need the demanding voice of *din* of judgment, the prophet that holds us to high standards so that we can grow and be all we are capable of, the father that instructs us on the right way to drive a car, and we also need to be told and told again that God loves us, because we are in fact God's most cherished creation, with all of our human *mishagas* and problems. Even when we feel we don't deserve to be loved by God, like a parent who gives us a knowing hug of reassurance, a silent, "been there, done that," God loves us anyway, because as our prayers this day will proclaim, God is also a loving and forgiving God who knows us too well to expect more from us than we are capable of being, we are only human.

God will forgive our imperfections; but can we forgive them in ourselves and in each other? The roots of Jewish guilt run so deep; they are wrapped so tightly around the very core of our identity as a people and as individuals. We feel guilt for succeeding and for failing. We feel guilt for our actions and our inactions, for what we say and for what we don't say. We can feel guilt for doing the right thing just as much as we can for the wrong thing, all depending upon the context of the incident. I didn't call my mother, and I feel guilty for it, I called my mother and feel guilty for being manipulated into calling my mother.

The message of this day and of everyday is that Yes, we can be better, but No, we will never be perfect; God didn't intend us to be. If we were, we would never experience life; we would still be in the Garden of Eden, blissfully unaware of the great and complex world that lies just beyond the trees. Paradise is not a natural condition, chaos is. Only God can make paradise out of chaos. The best we can do is the best we can do: to be as God-like as possible, and bring a little order, a little understanding, a little acknowledgement of the challenges we all face to our lives and those lives we touch. Imagine a world where we are all accepted and appreciated for the challenges and limitations and struggles that we all face every day. Imagine a world where we look upon one another not with judgment and disdain, but with compassion and forgiveness, because we have all been there, we have all done that. Imagine a world, were strive to be better, and don't beat ourselves or others up for not being perfect. That is the world envisioned by these High Holy Days, and that to me sounds a whole lot like paradise.

RABBI'S NOTE: This sermon was based heavily upon the writings of Rabbi Harold Kushner in his book How Good Do We Have To Be. As this was delivered orally, it was stylistically necessary at times to quote or paraphrase passages from Rabbi Kushner's book are without attribution.