JEWISH GUILT
Rabbi Dan Moskovitz

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.

"Jewish guilt" entered English literature half a century ago, and dozens of Woody Allen movies and Bernard Malamud novels later, the idea evokes a caricature of neurotic self-absorption: The Jewish father who, sixty years later, still blames all his son's failings on the fact that he was too busy at work to teach him a good work ethic. The Jewish mother who's convinced that though she made healthy meals and packed healthy lunches, her teenage daughter's extra pounds are her fault.

I could reverse the genders on those examples, but stereotypes ring truer in their false assumptions when we compound them with gross generalizations. As Alexandre Dumas wrote "All generalizations are dangerous, even this one."

And so it is a generalization to say that Jewish Guilt is a driving force for many of us, but at the same time, three weeks ago there were 1,000 people in this sanctuary for Yom Kippur (the guilt holiday as some have called it) – so it's not just my own neurosis imagination, it's yours too.

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 Bella will read tomorrow and which occurs in chapter three of the Torah. That 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 accountable. 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 no matter what befalls them we will often blame ourselves.

They are told that they are mortal, that unlike any of God's other creatures they will live with the knowledge that life is finite, that one day they will die. As punishment, God takes away innocence and immortality, and we feel guilty we will never do enough in the time we have.

In both the Jewish and Christian understanding of the story, human beings are conditioned to think that they are intended to live sin free, perfect lives; as a result, we feel immense guilt when we are not able to meet those expectations. God's or our own.

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 parents 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 more than intentional bad deeds are 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.

We are twenty-six days into the New Year. Twenty-six days past the reset button when we wiped the slate clean and started all over again. The question is not will we make

mistakes in this New Year, twenty-six days in I've already lost count. The question is what will our mistakes lead us to do next?

And here is where guilt in general and Jewish guilt in particular is a paradox.

When guilt brings you to inertia it is a wasted emotion. What good comes from sitting and dwelling on everything you've done wrong? It just leaves you in a state of inaction due to your guilt inflicted debilitating depression. But guilt can also be a good thing, a powerful emotion when viewed through the Jewish lens of *Charatah* or what I call Good Guilt.

Charatah / Good Guilt is a regret that spurs you to action. In Judaism, the focus is on *charatah*, regret about the past but more importantly, good decisions for the future. Any emotion that brings about inaction needs to be

dissipated as fast as possible but if an emotion can bring you to positive change, that's a good emotion to be stuck in.

A Chassidic text, Orchoth Tzaddikim teaches, "Regret is the path to all good deeds. If you have done something to your friend, regret and go and appease him. And if your friend has done something to you and he regrets it, accept him."

And there's the paradox and the lesson — guilt perpetuates negativity and is ultimately debilitating while regret motivates us to tackle the problems caused by unresolved emotions. One promotes growth, the other kills it.

To prevent falling into a debilitating shame, the Jewish way is actually not to allow these feelings of guilt to

bog us down, rather to plan them in advance through an intentional process of *charatah*, of uncovering regrets.

In Judaism, there are specific times of reflection on our past behaviors and times of our day that we devote to these thoughts, such as before going to sleep at night in words preceding the prayer of Shema. A portion is devoted to naming our regrets and praying for forgiveness.

In Kabbalistic tradition, Thursday nights are a time of reflection as well as the evening of Rosh Chodesh, the first day of the month marked by the appearance of the new moon, when some Jews go as far as fasting for forgiveness.

In one way every day is Yom Kippur, every day is a day to feel *Charatah*/regret because if thoughts about behavior come to you randomly, they will usually be a force of negativity in the middle of what you're doing and that is guilt, negative thoughts that can suddenly interrupt a

really good action. But if we plan time for reflection, if we plan a time every day to take an accounting of our actions and then guilt becomes regret and that is not a wasted emotion but rather a necessary step in our own ongoing process of creation and renewal.

So twenty-six days into this New Year, resolutions abandoned, best intentions – best forgotten, if you want to feel guilty, feel guilty about not feeling guilty often enough. Embrace *Charatah*, embrace regret, the Good Jewish Guilt that spurs you to action.