

**Rabbi Richard Agler
Keys Jewish Community Center
Tavernier, FL**

**September 22, 2015
10 Tishrei, 5776
Kol Nidre**

**Seven Not Necessarily Deadly—but Still Pretty Damaging Sins
Part I**

Earlier this year a colleague sent me and a couple of others
an email asking for guidance on a certain matter.
He said he was sending it to us in particular
because he considered us to be experts in this field.
I gave him my answer but added that
I thought he must have included me by mistake.
I wasn't an expert in that field at all.
No, he wrote back. This was after due consideration.
As far as he was concerned, I was a *maven* on the subject.
He went on, "Please don't disabuse me of this belief.
We all need our heroes."
"Okay," I wrote back, "Consider yourself abused."
He replied, "And it feels so good."

It's true that we all need our heroes.
Even when they are not who we think they are, we follow them,
pretending they are who we want them to be.
We human beings are such curious creatures.
We have a rational faculty that enables us to distinguish between
true and false, right and wrong, helpful and harmful.
Yet so often we set it all aside and let our emotions chart the course instead.
It gives us the soggy mess we call the human drama.

The message of the High Holidays is that our higher selves
can prevail over our lesser selves--at least more often.
It is easy to say but not as easy to do.
One of the reasons is that we keep insisting on
doing things we'd be better off not doing,
and worshipping fake heroes is but one on a long list.
For this *Yom Kippur*, tonight and tomorrow morning,
I've chosen to focus on seven not necessarily deadly,
but nevertheless pretty damaging sins.
Maybe it will help us break some of their hold on us.

Let's continue with fake heroes, or, as the *machzor* calls it,
"*Al chet she'chatanu lifanecha b'timhon levav.*"
For the sin we have committed against you by confusing our values."
You may remember when Barry Bonds of the SF Giants
was chasing the all time major league baseball home run record.
He was booed in virtually every ballpark in America. For good reason.
There was considerable evidence that he was cheating

through the use of performance enhancing drugs.
 If he was going to break the records of
 the venerated Babe Ruth and Henry Aaron,
 most people felt he should be doing it honestly.
 There wasn't enough evidence to convict him in a court of law but
 there was plenty enough to convict him in the court of public opinion.
 Surveys showed that the overwhelming majority of baseball fans
 did not want him to break the record—except in San Francisco—
 the city his team called home. There they cheered his every blast.
 Similarly, the NE Patriots star quarterback Tom Brady,
 who as you may have heard,
 was caught earlier this year playing with under inflated footballs.
 Again, most football fans criticized Brady.
 Except for fans of the Patriots, who would brook no suggestion
 that their star's and their team's record was in any way tainted.
 Yes, we all need our heroes--and we don't want to be disabused of them.
 Even when part of us probably knows better.

Those examples are from the world of sports.
 But the phenomenon manifests itself in more significant arenas too.
 When someone in the public trust is caught
 in a scandal, an error in judgment, or is proven wrong by history,
 political partisans act pretty much the way sports fans do.
 When it's our guy/gal, whose virtue is obviously beyond question,
 we defend him/her against every enemy and naysayer,
 whose motives are just as transparently selfish and ignoble.
 When it is the other's guy/gal/party,
 we pounce, often with glee, as finally, their true perfidy is exposed.
 Neither side gives any quarter.
 The narrative plays out *ad nauseum* and *ad infinitum*
 with self-righteousness and vituperation all around.

Similarly, when it's a country that's in question.
 As far as we are concerned, some can do no right. Some can do no wrong.
 How do we judge when it is
 Russia? Iran? Saudi Arabia? France? Israel? America?
 Pretty quickly for the most part.
 We are either fans, willing to overlook or excuse just about anything.
 Or opponents, willing to look at another side of next to nothing.

We know that reality is rarely that simple or black and white.
 But we can't seem to let it go. And it hurts us.
 It's one thing for sports fans
 but citizens in a democracy should be operating on a higher level.
 The quality of our national conversations matter.
 They impact the world around us and they impact the world inside us.
 It may be that we all need our heroes. Or for that matter our villains.
 But holding on to them out of blind loyalty, just because it "feels so good,"

does us no good whatsoever.

When the issues matter, we are better off using our rational faculties,
and setting our need for hero worship to the side.

Al chet she'chatanu lifanecha b'timhon levav.

For the sin we have committed against you by confusion of values.

Closely related is

Al chet she'chatanu lifanecha b'vli da'at, b'tipshut peh.” Literally,

“For the sin we have committed against you out of ignorance and stupid talk.”

Those are harsh words so let's retranslate them for the moment as
the sins of being obtuse and neglecting nuance.

(Which cause us to sound ignorant and stupid.)

Nuance. It enables us to respect the fine shading of human differences,
concerns, needs and sensitivities.

It enables us to appreciate that human beings are complex creatures,
and that society is an even more complex organism,
one that rarely lends itself to simple solutions.

Nuance allows us to pay attention to subtleties, without which
we would not be able to get along with one another in the least.

Whenever I hear speechifying that lacks nuance,
red meat tossed to whatever group of hungry jackals,
I get disgusted and shudder.

Survivors of the twentieth century should know better
than to consume obtuseness in the twenty first.

“Half a league, half a league, half a league on...”

“Cannon to the right of them, cannon to the left of them...”

“Not though the soldier knew someone had blundered...”

“Into the valley of Death rode the six hundred.”

Tennyson's “Charge of the Light Brigade”

was not the last horror caused by ignorant, obtuse, stupid talk.

This one can be a deadly sin.

Tipshut peh in high places is not new. When H.L. Mencken wrote for The Baltimore Sun, its editor, Charles Grasty, and the city's mayor, James Preston, were the best of enemies. Mencken wrote, “If Preston, as mayor, proposed to enlarge the town dog pound, Grasty denounced it . . . as an assault upon the solvency of Baltimore, the comity of nations and the Ten Commandments. If Grasty argued . . . that the town alleys ought to be cleaned oftener, Preston went about ... warning ... that the proposal was only the opening wedge for anarchy, atheism and cannibalism.” Okay, Mencken was a satirist.

But not satirical was the Presidential election of 1800. Yes, 1800. The protagonists were John Adams and Thomas Jefferson. I confess it surprised me to learn that the tone of that election was little different from the one Mencken describes in Baltimore city politics or for that matter, from our national politics today. Obtuse, ignorant, stupid talk. From supporters of Adams and Jefferson no

less.

Marx said, “History repeats itself. The first time as tragedy, the second time as farce.” But what about the umpteenth time? Maybe tragedy again.

We know there are mass media outlets that fan the flames of obtuseness. They are not stupid but they know how to sell to it—quite well, thank you. We should know by this time that the “breaking news alerts” that flash on screen a hundred times a day are not there to inform us—they are there to ensnare and manipulate us.

There are likewise politicians who are much smarter than they let on. Again, the obtuse is easier to sell than nuanced. Stupid asks nothing of its audience. Smart demands it. And they can do the math.

It is not difficult to make a statement that sounds like it’s moral high ground for virtually any position you want to take. The Nazis did it with genocide for heaven’s sake. Just because we’ve latched on to a good sounding phrase does not make us right. There are any number of good sounding phrases, equally moral and sensible, on the other side of virtually every argument. Pretending that all of the right is on one side is obtuse—and also usually ignorant and stupid.

Again, power flows to those who are skilled at exploiting this. Instead of accepting this, we can learn to recognize when we are being played. And demand more of ourselves and those who try to play us.

“Al chet she’chatanu lifanecha b’vli da’at, b’tipshut peh.

For the sin we have committed against you with ignorance and stupid talk.”

“Al chet she’chatanu lifanecha b’kashiut oref.

For the sin we have committed against you by being stiff-necked.”

The description of our people as an *am kashei oref* goes back to the Torah.

It is one of the few Biblical assertions that has never been challenged.

“Rabbi, was the world really created in six days? Well...

Did the sea really split in two? Well...

Was the whole Torah really given at Mt. Sinai? Well...

“Are we really a stiff necked people?” Seriously? You have to ask?!

We shouldn’t get bent out of shape about it.

Most humans probably fit the description.

We hold on to what we want to think come what may.

Today there is a fancy term for being stiff-necked.

It’s called “Confirmation Bias”,

“the tendency to search for, interpret, favor, and recall information in a way that confirms our existing beliefs.” (Thank you Wikipedia.)

The term dates to the 1960’s, but the phenomenon has been around basically forever.

In the fifth century BCE Thucydides wrote,

“It is a habit of mankind to ... use sovereign reason

to thrust aside what they do not fancy.” (from *The Peloponnesian War*)
 In 1620 CE Francis Bacon wrote,

“The human understanding, when it has adopted an opinion...
 draws all things else to support and agree with it.

And though there be a greater number and weight of instances to be found
 on the other side, yet these it either neglects or despises,
 or else by some distinction sets aside or rejects.” (from *Novum Organum*)

Again, we insist that what we want to be true is true.

And we hold on to it until it is no longer possible to do so—at the earliest.

We had another Confederate battle flag controversy in America this summer. “Race, you say? It has nothing to do with race! It’s about heritage!” Yes, it’s about the heritage of fighting to enslave another race! But try telling that to someone who doesn’t want to hear it. We drove through a good bit of Georgia and the Carolinas this summer. I can report that super sized Confederate battle flags, many of them brand new, are flying everywhere from front lawns to flagpoles to out the backs of pickup trucks. Being stiff-necked is hardly just a Jewish thing.

There is something in science called Planck’s Principle. It was formulated by the Nobel Prize winning physicist Max Planck—who is also credited with formulating quantum theory. According to Planck, “A new scientific truth does not triumph by convincing its opponents and making them see the light, but rather because its opponents eventually die and a new generation grows up that is familiar with it.” (*Scientific autobiography, 1950, p. 33*) Yes. According to Planck, new scientific ideas do not gain acceptance because of evidence, argument, or persuasion, but because older thinkers and their ideas eventually pass away.

“Hello?!” These are *scientists* we’re talking about! Not pitchfork and torch carrying mobs. Not die hard flag wavers or nutty sports fans like me--*Scientists!* The ones who get results by experimentation. The ones who reach conclusions that can be replicated. The ones who corroborate findings with data. You are telling me scientists don’t accept new truth until they die? That’s not how science is supposed to work!

Decidedly not, but if Planck is right, scientists are human beings first, and stiff-necked human beings at that. They too insist that what they want to be true is true—even when the evidence doesn’t support it. It makes you wonder, if this is how they act, what chance do the rest of us have?

Maybe this one. Maybe by recognizing how susceptible we are, we can gain awareness and the ability to overcome it. It is encouraging that Planck formulated his principle when he saw it operating within himself. He did not want to let go of one of his own pet theories. But he was a great enough scientist, and a decent enough human being, at least on this score, to recognize that he had to. Would that all of us could do the same—and become a little less stiff-necked in the new year.

Al chet she’chatanu lifanecha b’kashiut oref.

**For the sin we have committed against you out of stubbornness,
by not letting go when we should know better.**

“V'al kulam, Elohai slichot, s'lach lanu, m'chal lanu, kaper lanu.

**For all these sins O God of Forgiveness,
forgive us, pardon us and grant us atonement.”**

We'll continue tomorrow.

G'mar tov and l'shana tovah.