

Where did we get the idea that we have to be perfect to be good, to be worthy of love and acceptance? Did we get it from our parents who had such lofty goals for us, who always wanted us to do better, and make the most of ourselves? Did we get it from our teachers, whose method of instruction was to spend more time pointing out what we did wrong than praising us for what we got right? Did we get it from the rabbis and religious leaders of our youth, who emphasized the seriousness of whatever moral and ritual infractions we were capable of when we were children, and taught us that every little deed counted? Whatever its roots, we certainly seem to have gotten the idea that to be good, we had to try to be perfect.

That's why it is so hard for us ever to admit that we are wrong. That's why we instinctively feel the need to defend ourselves when we are criticized. It's like the bumper sticker that reads "The man who can smile when things are going badly has just thought of somebody to blame." We think we have to win every argument, justify every mistake, defuse every criticism, because if we ever admitted that we were wrong, we would be less than perfect and people would not love us. And, the result is we become stubborn, defensive, always insisting that the problem is somebody else's fault. And, if you think about it, what is so loveable about that?

The person, who feels he always has to be perfect, may secretly feel that if people really knew him, they would not like him. On the political scene, and we have had a lot of experience thinking about this a year ago, who impresses us more as a leader? Who is mature and has it all together? The person who denies he was ever wrong, who has to insist that he has never made a mistake, who blames his staff, the press, his political enemies or the person who can handle the admission that he is not perfect?

Now this is a rule for family arguments, too. The person who cannot admit a mistake, who always has to be right, may think that he or she is showing strength, wisdom and control. In point of fact, what he is showing is weakness and fear. The fear that if he confesses to being fallible, if it becomes known that he was not perfect, people would no longer love him. We feel we have to demand love by making the case that we are entitled to it on grounds of perfection, rather than let the other person give it to us as a free gift.

That's why I suggested in a sermon recently, that the four most religious words in the English language are "I may be wrong," and that in a power struggle between parent and child, between husband and wife, the first one to use the those words, "I may be wrong," wins, because he or she has been able to outgrow the immature need to win every point.

That's what scares me about some of the fundamentalist preachers on television and elsewhere. Their position is that if the Bible is ever wrong on one detail – whether the world was really created in six days, or how long Methuselah lived, or whether Joshua really made the sun stand still, – then it's a totally worthless book. It has to be perfect or it's no good at all. Behind it is the attitude that something or somebody has to be perfect in order to be taken seriously.

That's why one of the most wonderful things that ever happen to us is to find out that you can be less than perfect and still be loved. It's not that our sins and mistakes don't matter. They matter very much. They have consequences in our lives and the lives of people around us. But they are not enough to shatter the relationship between us and God, or between us and other people. Where did we ever get the idea that love means admiring someone for being perfect?

Just the opposite; love means accepting someone in full awareness of his or her imperfection. Love is blind for only teenagers with crushes, because young people had not learned to comprise and to handle ambiguity. They are always looking for someone perfect, perhaps as a way of saying, "If somebody perfect likes me, then I must be pretty perfect." That's why they are so sensitive if you point out the faults of the person they think they are in love with. But, God is not a teenager and neither are most of us. And for us, love is not blind. Love is open-eyed and forgiving.

One of the things Yom Kippur comes to do is precisely this: to wear down our defenses. We fast for 24 hours. We spend the entire day in prayer. We repeat the prayers over and over again, " _____, " for the sin we have committed before You...almost like the interrogator browbeating the witness until finally, through a combination of physical and emotional weariness we stop denying, we stop defending ourselves, we stop making excuses and pretending that the prayers are just words. We admit that we were weak, superficial, selfish, confused about what was really important. And the moment we do that, something unexpected happens, something very surprising. We don't feel humiliated, exposed and put down. We feel relieved. We feel clean and strong.

All that energy we had been putting into rationalizing and justifying ourselves is free to be used to do other things. It's the psychological equivalent of the budget debate in Congress. If you don't have to put most of your resources into defense because you no longer think you are about to be attacked, then we can use them in other more productive ways. In Temple, as at home, the person who says, "I was wrong," not as a tactic, but in a moment of honest self-confrontation, does not lose; he wins.

For as long as I can remember, I have been taught, and I've taught you, that first you have to forgive the people around you, and only then, could you ask God to forgive you. And, I've always found that a hard thing to do. This year, for the first time, I realized that the tradition had it backwards. It really works the other way around. First, you have to feel forgiven. You have to feel you are okay, you are a good acceptable person, even if you do some things wrong. And, only then, after you have been liberated from the burden of trying to be perfect, of defending and justifying yourself at every point, only then do you feel empowered to forgive others.

There is a conversation I've had with at least 30 members of this congregation, one-at-a-time, and almost word-for-word, the same conversation each time. People tell me they feel like failures despite the fact that they've worked hard at their jobs and raising their families all their lives, because they did not live up to their parents' expectations for them.

Their parents wanted them to do better at school, to be more successful. I asked them "Did it ever occur to you that your parents were kind of mixed up, that they had problems of their own and that's why they had these unrealistic dreams for you? Maybe your father needed you to become a success because he felt he was a failure. Maybe your mother constantly criticized your boyfriends because it was important to her that your marriage turned out better than hers did. But that's their problem. I know that when you were small, they seemed so big and strong and smart. But you have grown up now. You don't have to see yourself as they saw you, because they may have seen you wrong."

Rabbi Harold Schulweis, in Los Angeles, says that there is a distinctively Jewish form of child abuse. It's called "being disappointed." So many people I meet are burdened by the feeling that they disappointed their parents after all their parents did for them, and have trouble accepting the notion that their parents set themselves up for disappointment with their unrealistic dreams. But that's their problem, not ours.

We can love our parents. We can honor them as we are commanded to, and we can still see that they are sometimes selfish, small minded, distracted by other problems, but none of those are unforgivable sins. As parents they were amateurs in a game where even professionals commit errors; how much perfection could we have expected from them? They were unrealistic if they expected us to be perfect. We are equally unrealistic if we carry around the notion that they were perfect, that any time they criticized us they were right.

I meet people who are still arguing with their parents, still looking for approval or an apology. In some cases the parents are elderly, even senile. In some cases the parents have been dead for 30 years and the daughter is still trying to get them to smile and say to her “you’re a good girl.” I ask those people, “Why is it so important to you? Can you accept the idea that if your father never told you he loved you, it’s not because you are not loveable? It’s because he had trouble saying those words, probably because of the way his parents raised him and the circumstances of his childhood, and, if we had all the facts, we could probably trace the blame all the way back to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. But really, what difference would it make?”

When our parents criticize us, it is hard for us not to feel attacked and to become defensive even if we have done nothing wrong and their demands are unreasonable. But, suppose instead of seeing their words as an attack on us, we could learn to see those words as their problem, as an expression of their neediness.

Suppose instead of responding in our own minds by saying “I wish they would get off my back and stop making me feel guilty,” – suppose we learn to say, “I understand what makes them act like that and I forgive them for it,” which is what we picture God saying about us on Yom Kippur. Suppose we give them the permission to be flawed, to be weak and human and unreasonable, as God gives us permission to be. But we could love them anyway because we have learned that you don’t have to be perfect to earn somebody’s love.

When we have gone through the Yom Kippur experience of being forgiven for being human, of learning that nobody has the right to expect us to be perfect, then we can share that feeling of forgiveness, not only with our parents, but with our children as well. We can let go of the notion that our children have to be perfect, in order for us to love them. We will no longer see their failures as reflecting on us, and so we will be able to respond to their problems, their shortcomings, in a spirit of support and compassion, rather than disappointment and blame.

We want children not only to provide us with immortality and support us in our old age. We want them to redeem us from our failures. To be the successes we never were – the top student, the best athlete, the most popular girl in the class. They will make us look good. How else do you explain the emotional involvement of parents in Little League ball games, or the number cars that advertise where somebody's son or daughter goes to college? When our children surprisingly turn out to be a lot like us, doing some things pretty well and some things pretty badly, but not world class at anything, or when they turn out to have physical or emotional problems, we get confused. We are no longer sure exactly how we feel about them. We love them, we hurt for them, but at another level we cannot help saying to ourselves that this is not what we bargained for. Maybe that is why Abraham thought he heard the voice of God telling him to sacrifice Isaac.

It is only when we learn to accept our children as people in their own right and not as instruments of correcting our flaws or enhancing our image that we can forgive them for being only human and love them for who they are.

My friends, if you have been in Jerusalem, you probably remember that the Southern Gate of the Old City, the one closest to the kotel, is known today as the Lion's Gate. It used to have another name. It used to be called the Dung Gate, _____, the Gate of Filth. The reason usually given for the name is that, during the years the Old City was in Turkish or Arab hands, they would dump garbage at that gate, to make it harder for the Jews who wanted to go to the kotel, to the Western Wall. But among the legends of Old Jerusalem, there is another explanation for that name, one I like better. It teaches that Jewish pilgrims would come to Jerusalem from all over the world to pray at the Wall. They would come on foot across the desert. By the time they reached the gates of the city their feet would be covered with mud and dirt. They did not want to defile the Temple Mount by entering the City in that condition, so they would wash all the mud and filth off their feet at that Southern Gate.

We stand this morning at the Gate leading to a New Year. We want to enter it clean and undefiled. So we ask Yom Kippur to wash us clean of all those old habits and resentments – the need always to be right, the feeling that we have to be perfect, the fear that no one will love us if they find out we did something wrong, the anger we feel at parents and children, husbands and wives who have problems that we cannot solve and we resent them for making us feel incomplete, because we cannot solve their problems when all they really want from us is our love and acceptance, not some magic wand. Throughout all

of the past year we have been burdened by those feelings and that's why the year was not as good as it might have been. Only if we wash ourselves clean of those resentments, those expectations, those fears, only then can we walk through the Gate and claim the good New Year that awaits us.