

A Jewish parenting blog, called Kveller.com, recently posted an article about “facebooking.”

The mom writes:

So, according to [Facebook](#), this is how I spent my Saturday with the kids:

My children and I woke up with the sun, smiling and ready to ... “make it a great day.”

My hair was shiny. My smile, too.

We drank our morning drinks in latte cups—frothy foam mustaches lacing our lips.

We played backgammon, our skin mottled by drops of shade in the morning light.

We went for a walk in the orchards, and we danced between emerald leaves like fairies.

We rocked out to [our favorite music].

‘Cuz that’s how we roll: Just another day being totally awesome.

And while all of this is basically true...

Here’s how it really went down.

She went on to describe in wickedly funny detail the truth behind the post. Dirty faces, moments of joy, sticky fingers and bouts of fighting. Some crying and a lot of whining. A cute photo op from time to time but all other moments created sheer panic, exhaustion and epic fails. She goes on to suggest... “My life on Facebook is an airbrushed and Instagrammed image of my real life. I edit ...because I want people to think I have it together. I give everything a hipstacular filter to make the drudgery look interesting I think we’d all be happier if I stopped pretending, and making friends on Facebook feel like they have to pretend as well.”

Social media analysts suggest that the deception we put forth on social media, can stem from the fear of missing out, or the desire to portray our lives as better than they actually are. Perhaps we attempt to partake in frozen nostalgia, the concept of only remembering those snapshots of perfection and hilarity, amid the sea of chaos, disorder and reality – the sacred messiness of life. But “facebooking” as it has been labeled, seems to fall into a greater category of behaviors worthy of repentance.

The rabbis consider deception, *gneevat daat*,¹ literally stealing the mind as the most egregious of all types of theft. No, there is no material loss necessarily, but that willful misleading, deceiving, and falsifying begets other behaviors that can cause greater harm. This “stealing knowledge”, means fooling someone into having a mistaken assumption, belief, or impression, even if no actual lying is involved.

There is no doubt we have been deceived throughout our lives, through false advertising, labeling or marketing. For sure the public has been misled and misinformed by our leaders, celebrities, athletes or actors on the geo-political stage. Sometimes it is by those closest to us.

We all know what it is like to be taken in by this type of deception, and often when we realize we have been “duped,” we feel as if someone has stolen something from us. And

¹ BT (Chullin 94a) tosefta ; Tosefta Bava Kama 7:3

interestingly, the rabbinic thinking is that we *have* been robbed – our mind, perception, understanding have been pillaged.

As angry as we get when it happens to us, often we see that we are guilty of it ourselves. In a clear moment of understanding human behavior, the rabbis in the Talmud enumerated some of the various ways we ourselves engage in this kind of deception. *Geneivat daat* is when we offer to pay the bill at a restaurant, knowing that the other person won't accept, or when we invite someone to a party that we know they can't attend, both ways of creating a false impression of generosity. When we take credit for something we didn't really do, or pad our job resume - all these things "steal" others' goodwill, understanding, or deliberately create a false impression of who we are.

But what about those times we have deceived ourselves? Keeping our Facebook pages with their half-truthful moments of “frozen nostalgia” is the least of our concerns when we find ourselves sitting in the same place, year after year, Yom Kippur after Yom Kippur deceiving ourselves that we are ready and willing to change our ways.

What did you vow to yourself last year that you are promising again today? To be a little kinder? A better listener? Less angry? More giving or more forgiving?

There is a blessing we say in a large crowd that speaks to the understanding that we all have some level of deception as part of our behavior – the prayer says, Blessed is God, knower of secrets – If we think for just a moment about all those secrets we have, excuses we make for our behaviors, the covering up, the rationalizing – today, if we are honest, all of that is exposed. Today of all days we must remember that when we lie to ourselves, when we deny our own truth, we deny our own potential.²

A modern prayer book revisits the list of sins enumerated in the High Holiday liturgy. Oftentimes, those adaptations or modernizations speak about our communal failings in the world of social justice or awareness. But this one captures the foibles, hindrances, the obstacles we put in our own way, prohibiting us from making real *teshuvah* – a real change in our lives. It reads:

For the sin we committed against You though evading and avoiding, because we could not face the truth.

For our flight into hypocrisy and deception because we did not dare to speak it.

For the Facts we dissembled, and all we glossed over, for the excuses we made.

For our foolishness, our folly, and false standards

For seeing these things only in others, never in ourselves.

For our complacency which blinds us, and our self-righteousness which lessens us.

For the fear of change and renewal, and our unbelief.

² Steve Maraboli, *Unapologetically You: Reflections on Life and the Human Experience*

For saying prayers aloud, but refusing to listen.
For being our own worst enemy.³

Why is it so difficult to follow through with the changes we say we want to make?

Teshuvah, repentance, changing our direction is not a hard idea to grasp intellectually. But the process of repentance, turning, critical self examination or personal accounting is a hard process to begin, and even harder to follow through with. It leaves us vulnerable, as we seek or await forgiveness from others, or maybe ourselves – and now, once again, we are at the starting line, wanting, hoping, trying to take seriously this idea of repentance. Yet, many of us, including myself, find just starting again challenging. *Kol ha Hatchalot Kashot* – all beginnings are difficult... There are so many obstacles.

One obstacle is that we are often unwilling to admit we have done anything wrong – we are masters of making excuses, rationalizing and denying. As Rabbi Eddie Sukol once taught, “If you cannot think of anything for which you should repent, ask your husband or wife, your partner or friend if they have any suggestions. I’ll bet they do. Or still, ask your parents, or siblings, or your children...” I am sure we’ll each have a list in no time.

Perhaps out of fear of failure or of success, perhaps out of self-preservation, we rationalize our behavior, we become experts at denying our faults, and ignoring our shortcomings. Someone once said, “We are all manufacturers – making good, making trouble, or making excuses!”⁴ We create stories, frame our actions in such a way to just make it through each day.

“With our blinders safely in place, we make our way through life. But the story always takes a similar turn. When things go wrong [when we fall off the wagon, lose a friendship, wreck a relationship, have troubles at work or home, miss an opportunity] we wonder why - why we keep making the same mistakes. The answer is simple. Without honesty, without soul-searching, we can never hope to truly change or grow. If we want to transform the plot of our lives we have to learn to become experts at facing our faults.

“[To do this well, to do this right], takes time and enormous strength, and it can be painful. But if we can imagine ourselves freed from the self-defeating patterns, responding differently to situations that always tripped us up in the past, we can imagine ourselves coming closer to the goodness we aspire to – closer to goal we set to be our best selves.”⁵

We are perfectly human which means we are imperfect. This is our situation on earth, we will need to repent – but first we need to admit where we have failed. Only then can we learn and grow. If instead of seeing our error, our faults as a taint on our **ego**, we regard it as a failed

³ Lionel Blue in *Forms of Prayer*

⁴ H.V. Adolt

⁵ based on Naomi Levy, prayer for facing our faults p 226-7

behavior – if we see it as **wrong-doing** rather than wrong-**being**, perhaps we can get out from under the shame, refrain from brooding of what has been done and try to learn from our experience how to do better.

I, for one, am great at making resolutions. I am lousy at keeping them. I'll admit...I am pretty good at hiding from my faults, making excuses, sometimes blaming others for my own mistakes. I try to remember what my dear friend teaches me, when you point the finger at someone else, three more point back at you.

I have the desire to change – most of the time – but it's the follow through that I often stumble on. Each and every year, among my other promises, I resolve to take better care of myself. Eat better. Work out more. Get healthy, and stay healthy. Every year, I seem to make the same resolutions. Every day, it is a struggle to keep them.

I have two have two messages I keep by my mirror at home. One says, quite simply, "Quit complaining about things you do nothing to change." I apply this not just to my health, my worries about social justice, my time management. And the other I use as a motivator to actually get moving on any of those challenges. It comes from an old Nike Ad:

Quit making excuses, putting it off, complaining about it, dreaming about it, whining about it, crying about it, believing you can't, worrying if you can, waiting until you are older, skinnier, richer, braver, or all around better. Suck it up, hold on tight, say a prayer, make a plan & JUST DO IT. Daily reminders... yet so hard to do.

Changing who we are can seem insurmountable but the key to understanding the power of Yom Kippur is that we don't have to change who we are. We focus on changing what we do. Our tradition teaches that we have free will: changing what we do is constantly within our power. And then of course, as we change what we do, we change who we are. Opportunities for *teshuvah*, for redirection, are before us at every moment.

Sometimes we are motivated to change out of fear – a bad report from a doctor, or the loss of a loved one that reminds us how short our lives really are, or any time we face our own mortality.

There's an interesting story about this kind of *teshuvah*. Alfred Nobel was a chemist, engineer, and inventor. He amassed a fortune during his lifetime, most of it from hundreds of inventions, of which dynamite is the most famous.

When he was 55 he had the opportunity to read his own obituary while still alive. In truth, Alfred's brother Ludwig had died and the mistaken publication of Alfred's obituary condemning his invention of dynamite, is said to have made him decide to leave a better legacy to the world after his death. The obituary stated, "The merchant of death is dead," and went on to say, "Dr. Alfred Nobel, who became rich by finding ways to kill more people faster than ever before, died yesterday."

Nobel was disappointed with what he read and concerned with how he would be remembered. In that moment, he decided that he should bring good to the world as well, and so he invested \$4.2 million (which is well over \$100 million in today's currency) to start a fund to encourage outstanding progress in peace, medicine, literature, physics, chemistry, and physiology. As it turns out, the inventor of dynamite started the annual Nobel Prize, given to those who conferred the "greatest benefit on mankind." He made a change to bring about better change.⁶

Fear can be a great motivator. The problem is that in more cases than not, once the motivation is gone, so too is the improved behavior. The truth of our human condition gets in our way: We are caught between the instinct to conserve and the drive to change. We hold on to what we know – our old ways, our own habits – because the unknown can be frightening or destabilizing.

The rabbis suggest that a stronger, more lasting type of change works more effectively on people when it is gradual. This kind of repentance recognizes that like crash diets, crash *teshuvah* doesn't have a long shelf-life. This method goes beyond a change in action; it is a deep internal change in attitude. It is a slow, gradual change, accepting of the fact we may need one holiday season upon another to ultimately achieve our goal. We will try, we may fall, slip up backslide – but like a parent watching a child walk for the first time, with each step forward, no matter how shaky, and even if there are falls in between, there are cheers and celebrations – you're moving in the right direction.

Yom Kippur can be overwhelming if we pay attention – but it is also liberating. The gift of The Day of Atonement is that it can be a day of transformation. When we make excuses, when we hide behind our fear, when we blame others, we cede control of our situation over to those forces. We abdicate responsibility for our own lives and no longer have agency to make a change. That is not the free will we were born with. True, some of our situation is a result of others, or our environment, true - some we cannot control. But much of it we can – Like the prayer states, Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the thing I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.

So let's do something a bit different this year. First, cross your arms - go ahead, Do it. Ok, that is the way we normally do it. Now, put your other arm on top - cross your arms the other way. I know, it's a little different a little difficult, even awkward. But you can do it. It gets easier the more you try, the more you focus on it. It's the same overcoming the habits we wish to change.

⁶ From Encyclopedia Britannica, and *The Life of Alfred Nobel*.

Knowing it will feel a bit awkward – but, Like apologizing to someone you have hurt, after you verbalize, articulate the change you want to make, the next steps are somewhat easier – Our tradition necessitates that once we have learned the nature and extent of how our actions and inaction have negatively impacted ourselves and others, we are called to make amends to set things right. This is echoed in virtually any recipe for change throughout the ages:-make a plan, find someone or something to hold you accountable, and find a community. Here we are. Yom Kippur is the day that requires this considered action to improve ourselves so we can become a positive force for change in the world.

There's a simple story of a teacher in rural Michigan that speaks to the heart of this change – removing that first obstacle that helps us excuse our own behavior, our self-deception. It starts with a change in vocabulary. This teacher helped her students change their behaviors by changing their perspective.

One afternoon, a 4th grade teacher instructed her students to take out a piece of paper and to fill every single line with all the things that they “can’t do.”

Within just a couple minutes, the students had a full page of “I can’ts.” “I can’t do long division with more than three numerals,” began one.

“I can’t do ten push-ups,” read another.

“I can’t hit a home run.”

“I can’t make any friends.”

And while the students wrote their lists, the teacher herself was hard at work on her list:

“I can’t get John’s mother to come in for a teacher conference.”

“I can’t get my house in order.”

“I can’t eat only one cookie.”

“I can’t get my son to use his words instead of his fists.”

The students were then instructed to fold their papers in half and to bring them to the front of the room. They placed their “I Can’t statements into an empty shoe box labeled with those same two words: “I CAN’T”

And then, the class headed out the doorway and down the hall and out into the schoolyard. Thereupon, they began to dig. And then, they carefully placed the box of “I Can’ts” into the earth and filled the hole.

“Friends, we gather today to honor the memory of ‘I Can’t,’” the teacher began. “While he was with us on earth, he touched the lives of everyone, some more than others.

We have provided ‘I can’t’ with a final resting place and a headstone that contains his name. He is survived by his brothers and sister, ‘I Can,’ ‘I will’ and ‘I’m Going to Right Away.’ They are not as well known as their famous relative and are certainly not as strong and powerful, at least not yet. But perhaps someday, with your help, they will make an even bigger mark on the world. May ‘I Can’t’ rest in peace.” And then she continued, “May each of us moved forward in his

absence, writing for ourselves a different story with less ‘I can’t’ and more ‘I Can,’ ‘I will,’ and ‘I’m Going to Right Away.’”⁷

Imagine the different story our lives would tell if we removed all the excuses and “I can’t’s” from our vocabulary. As we prepare to embark on a New Year:

All vows, promises and commitments made Since last Yom Kippur and in the years before
May we be given the strength to keep them.

Our vows to ourselves, commitments to good health,
may we take our own lives seriously enough to heed them,

Keeping our promises in the way we eat and drink,
The way we work and rest, the way we deal with others.

Dear God, we meant in all seriousness the promises we made
To You, to each other, to ourselves.

All vows, promises and commitments
we make on this Yom Kippur Day.

May we be given the strength to keep them.⁸ AMEN

⁷ (Rabbi Amy Hertz)

⁸ Based on SWE