

A Clean Slate- Yom Kippur Sermon 5787
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Temple Micah Family Service

I have a confession

When I was about 10, I got tired of being the kid who always did what she was supposed to, who always followed the rules. I felt this urge to try out being “rebellious”

One summer night, I had a sleepover with my cousin Alexis, and we cuddled up behind the big brown leather couch in my living room. After she had turned over and gone to sleep, I took a hair clip out of my hair and began to carve out Alexis’ name into the leather...A...L...E...X... uh oh, I was not sure what came next. Alex-us? U? That can’t be right? Was there one S or two...As I was deep into my internal monologue, overwhelmed by my inability to both spell and rebel, Alexis sleepily rolled over and I dropped the hair clip. The next morning, Alexis went back to our aunt’s house and I went on with my day as usual, forgetting about my attempt at rebellion.

When I got home from camp the next day, my mom called me and my brother into the living room. My mom, a kind and gentle woman, was clearly not happy. She asked us directly, “who did this?” My brother said “not me!” Embarrassed, I panicked.

I was not used to seeing my mom this upset. We didn’t have much growing up, and that couch was relatively new. My mom had warned us to be careful with it. This was the couch where we often sat on as we ate dinner in front of the TV, and watched Netflix (that arrived in the mail through these things called DVDs).

So I said, “Umm...not me....” I briefly considered blaming Alexis. But before I could get the words out, my mom looked at the enormous word carved into the couch.

“A-L-E-X? Alex?” she said. “The only Alex I can think of is Kelly’s camp counselor.”

And that was it. She had found me through an incomplete truth. I was mortified.

I had wanted to do something bad and blame it on Alex(-i-s, for the record). What I hadn’t anticipated was having to admit that I had actually done it.
So let me ask you:

Raise your hand if you’ve ever done something you hoped nobody would notice.

Keep your hand up if, after you did something wrong, you've panicked when someone else found out

Every time I looked at that couch for years to come, my stomach dropped. There it was: this enormous, ugly reminder of the thing I had done. No one had been seriously hurt. I had not committed some terrible offense. But I had damaged something that mattered to my mother, and then I had tried to lie to her about it.

I apologized. But somewhere along the way, the story in my head changed. I was really hard on myself. It was no longer simply, "I did something wrong." It became, "There is something wrong with me."

That is the difference between guilt and shame. Guilt says: I did something wrong. But shame, shame says: There is something wrong with me.

Guilt can serve an important purpose. It tells us that we have violated one of our own values or hurt someone else, and that discomfort can move us toward repair. Shame takes that same discomfort and turns it inward. Instead of asking, "What do I need to do differently?" Shame asks, "What kind of person does this make me?" And once the question shifts from what I have *done* to who *I am*, it becomes much harder to imagine that I can *do anything* differently.

That is what makes shame so dangerous for anyone trying to practice teshuvah. Teshuvah asks us to turn toward what we have done, to look honestly at where we have fallen short, and still believe that we are capable of becoming something different.

That tension sits at the heart of Yom Kippur. We reflect on how we have missed the mark and we name the ways we have hurt one another, the ways we have failed to live according to our values, and the things we wish we had done differently. And then we are given the possibility of beginning again, a clean slate.

Beginning again does not mean erasing what happened. We cannot unsay the thing we said or undo the harm we caused or un-graffiti the couch. Sometimes there is repair we can make, and sometimes there are consequences that remain.

Every time I saw that couch, I had another opportunity to remember that I had done something wrong.

That is part of what I think makes teshuvah so challenging: it asks us to acknowledge the uncomfortable mistakes we have left behind without allowing them to become the

entirety of who we are. We have to face them, repair what we can, learn from them, and then ask what we will do differently when we encounter the next choice.

Toward the end of today's service, we will stand together and recite Ashamnu, our communal confession. We will say, "We have sinned. We have acted wrongly. We have missed the mark."

The language is plural. **And I hear that "we" in more than one way.**

First, we are confessing together as a community. We say "we" because none of us is perfect, and because teshuvah is a practice we undertake together.

Shame can grow in secrecy, and the things we carry alone can begin to feel enormous. When we stand together and say, "We have sinned," we remind ourselves that we are part of a community of imperfect people, all carrying our own mistakes, regrets, and unfinished work. Speaking these things aloud gives us a way to bring what we have been carrying into the open, where accountability and compassion can exist together.

I hear another "we" in Ashamnu, too. I congress alongside all the versions of myself who have brought me to this moment: the Rabbi Whitehead I am today, the Kelly I was in my twenties, teenage me, and the child who made mistakes before she had the language or perspective to understand them.

When I say Ashamnu, I am the Kelly of this past year, with all of her mistakes and missteps. But also within me is the little girl who sat behind that brown leather couch, hair clip in hand, carving her cousin's name into the leather and then lying when her mother asked who had done it.

I am confessing for the mistakes that made me who I am today AND I am standing here with all the Kellys I have been. Ashamnu, we have sinned.

And I am trying to offer them/us forgiveness, too.

Teshuvah asks us to do something difficult: to look honestly at what we have done without turning that honesty into a verdict on who we are. It asks us to take responsibility for the ways we have caused harm, while also making room for compassion toward the people we have been and the people we are still becoming.

Ashamnu, we have sinned, and Slach lanu, we can be forgiven.

(these things feel big, but by sharing them, we make them smaller)

And in saying these words together, we remind ourselves that forgiveness can live alongside accountability. We can remember what happened, learn from it, and carry that learning with us as we begin again. Our mistakes are not the final word.

If the scars can carry over into a new year, so can the forgiveness.

We observe Yom Kippur only after we have already celebrated Rosh Hashanah. We might imagine that the order should be reversed. First we would confess everything, repair everything, purify ourselves, and then arrive at Rosh Hashanah ready to begin the year as new people. But no...

First, Rosh Hashanah.

First, we stand before God and one another as the people we actually are before we have fixed everything, before we have apologized for everything, before we have become the people we hope to be. *Then* comes Yom Kippur.

Shame tells us that we have to become better people before we can begin again. Yom Kippur tells us something different: we begin with the people we actually are, carrying our mistakes, our messiness, our apologies, our complications, our imperfections, our hopes, and all the versions of ourselves who brought us here.

That is the work of these days: not becoming someone entirely new, but learning how to meet who we have been with enough honesty, compassion, and courage to choose who we will become. So may we be kind to one another and may we be kind to ourselves, all versions.

G'mar Chatima Tova