

It happens every year during my preparation for Yom Kippur, but I push it away and sharpen my focus elsewhere. Some years I find something else to say that evades or avoids my discomfort. Some years I satisfy myself by thinking that I have addressed it cleverly by taking an oblique approach, but I know that both these are really evasions. The "it" in question is the problem of using the completely insufficient and inappropriate word English word "sin" as a focal point of our Yom Kippur concern. This year, I intend to approach "it" head on. This year, we are going to banish as far as possible from our Yom Kippur vocabulary the word "sin," and replace it in each instance with the word "estrangement." So, for instance, this year we will not read "Avina Malkeinu, our father, our King, we have sinned before You," but rather, "Avinu Malkeinu, we have become estranged from You." This year, we will not read "for the sin we have sinned before You through gossip and disrespectful speech," but rather, "for the estrangement we have brought upon ourselves through gossip and disrespectful speech."

Now, you might well ask, "What's wrong with 'sin' all of a sudden? I've been sinning for years!" Well, first of all, the English word "sin" was never a good translation of the Hebrew word **chet**, which stands behind it. The word **chet** means to miss a target. It is a word that, outside of a synagogue, one might hear at an archery range. In the moral realm, this would presuppose the existence of a clearly marked target, some unmoving standard of behavior that should be possible to strike cleanly, and repeatedly. I don't believe that such a clear target exists, however. We try to stick to certain general principles, certainly—loving the stranger, for instance; honoring father and mother. But life is way too messy and way too complicated to judge our every action to be a "hit" or a "miss." Judaism maintains that there is a **halacha**, a broad path that leads toward a blurry and ever shifting target of right behavior. To be in a condition of **chet** means to be outside of that path, needing a course correction—a condition for which "estrangement" is far better description than sin, for estrangement can always be corrected. All it requires is a return to the correct heading.

The second problem with the English word "sin" is that it has become completely entangled with all sorts of Christian ideas, particularly ideas about the shamefulness of sexual desire, which is a judgement that had little place in Judaism before the rise of Christianity as a dominant world religion. In Jewish thought, there is nothing shameful about sex, and neither is there a well-marked target of virginal, pure, pristine sexual behavior. There are, to be certain, general paths by which Judaism seeks to channel the sexual impulse towards the maintenance of a just and righteous society, and these general paths have been widening, at least for Reform Jews. "Estrangement" is a much better word than "mortal sin" for what happens to someone who steps outside of these widening paths. Sin is a sin forever. Estrangement can always be corrected. All it would require is either return to the generally accepted path, or the widening of that path by concerted effort.

The third problem with the word "sin" is that it implies the willful disregard of a generally accepted and clearly defined rule. We all

break rules now and then, but I don't believe it is these few instances that weigh us down at this time of year. It is more the uncertainty and the relativity of things that bothers us. We are masters at devising explanations and excuses for ourselves, defining "sin" practically out of existence. "Okay," one might say, "I admit that it was wrong of me to have such harsh words with my dear old mother—but didn't I grow up listening to my dear old mother having harsh words with her dear old mother?" Or another might say, "Yes, I was a little harsh on my daughter's teacher when he sent her home with a D+ on her report card, but give me a break: the Taliban murder teachers like that. All I did was call the guidance counselor."

We have defined "sin" almost out of existence with all our explanations and excuses. Yet there is still an integrity and wholeness that we sometimes only notice when we lose it by treating each other poorly. Our problem is not sin; sin hardly exists anymore. Our problem is estrangement from ourselves and from others. We feel in our hearts that there is a deep goodness

and wholeness that is just barely out of reach—we are estranged from this wholeness, just a little bit too far ways to partake of it. But estrangement can always be corrected. All it requires is an acknowledgement of responsibility and agency. “If I got into this mess by myself, I can certainly get myself back home!”

Using the word “estrangement” broadens and deepens our experience of Yom Kippur, because “estrangement” is something we feel more and more deeply; while “sin” means less and less. We become estranged from **ourselves** as we are pushed and pulled by ten thousand conflicting demands upon our attention and our energy. We are busier than ever, juggling more cognitive inputs than ever—and more deeply fractured by it all.

We become estranged from **our loved ones** as secular culture exalts ever more highly the centrality of the individual self. We are bombarded with the message that self-expression is our highest calling—and that one expresses oneself by buying things;

more and more things for more and more money to distract and estrange us from each other.

We become estranged from **our communities**—local, national, international—as political problems appear to become insoluble. How many families are estranged over politics? How many neighbors? How many congregations?

We become estranged from **our earth** as we feel the natural order of things slipping away, the seasons losing their definition and catastrophe becoming commonplace.

These various estrangements, or their many variants that have surely been common in all times and places—Jews have expressed these estrangements as estrangement from God. ***Al chet she-chat-anu li-fanecha...*** meaning not, “for the sin we have sinned against You,” but rather, “for having estranged ourselves from You.” Because estrangement can always be connected. All it requires is a return. Let’s rise now and read together from the screen:

RESHARE