

I know I'm not 13 years old, so I wanted to thank you all for being here as I become a Bat Mitzvah at 21. My mom probably thinks I waited to do this so that I could drink at my party... and she is right. But in all seriousness I appreciate you all being here, in person and on zoom, to celebrate this special event in my life. I would especially like to thank Rabbi Lisa for taking a chance on me and guiding me through this process. I also want to thank my Hebrew tutor Jennifer for her patience and support. To Rachel, my Jewish liaison, without you I wouldn't be standing here right now so thank you. Last but not least I want to thank my parents for always being my biggest cheerleaders, I am so grateful for everything you do for me.

My Torah portion, Vayikra, describes the laws of animal sacrifice as they relate to atonement for guilt or sins. In this portion, God specifically distinguishes between sins committed on purpose, and sins committed inadvertently. The Torah explains how even if a person isn't aware that they have sinned, they are guilty nonetheless, and must complete a sacrifice. The sin offering, the Hatat, and the guilt offering, the Asham, provide atonement for these unintentional offenses against the Torah. In the modern era, we don't engage in animal sacrifice to absolve our sins, so what do we do to resolve our transgressions?

For starters, Judaism no longer believes there is a clear sense of Divine Reward or punishment. We believe that when we make mistakes we stray from God and our own inner balance, but also that we always have the opportunity to return. This "return" is referred to in Judaism or in Hebrew as Teshuvah. Teshuvah essentially means reestablishing the intimacy and trust between God and the human beings who were created out of love. Seven things were created before the world was made, Teshuvah being one of them. So essentially, human life is inconceivable without the possibility of returning to God or restoring one's lost inner balance.

Teshuvah is not only in our relationship with God but also our interpersonal relations. While transgressions against God are forgiven on Yom Kippur, transgressions between others are not forgiven unless amends are intentionally made. This is the harder part of teshuvah because we have to be vulnerable with someone who we don't know is ready to forgive us. That is why when someone approaches us for forgiveness, we are encouraged to accept with an open heart in hopes that when the situation is reversed, our Teshuvah can find acceptance as well.

Not only do we no longer perform animal sacrifices, but we also have shifted our perspectives on sins and their relevance. While the process of forgiveness and absolving our sins is important, we also now understand that self doubt and excessive worry about one's sins takes

us away from joy. Simcha or joy is the attitude towards life that Judaism seeks to instill. Simcha also happens to be my Hebrew name, and Joy is my English middle name. God wants us to be happy, anything that takes away our joy will likely take us away from God as well. We must repent our sins quickly, decide not to repeat them, and continue living with as much joy as we can.

As your traditional perfectionist, I was easily able to make a connection between my Torah portion and my own life. Excessively worrying about small mistakes in school, in dance, or with my friends and family is a common occurrence. If I mess up on stage I'm going to be thinking about it until I perform again. I've always known that this tendency was not a positive one, but I never had a real concept to attribute it to. Exploring Teshuvah and Simcha in my Torah portion and in my learning process becoming Bat Mitzvah has allowed me to find these answers.

While I studied for my Bat Mitzvah, I also had the opportunity to meet weekly with Ms. Aviva Cohen. I had the privilege of being able to learn about both her story as a hidden child in the Holocaust, and who she is today. From my first meeting with Aviva I knew that she was a special person. I remember immediately going to my friends in awe of how positive and joyful Aviva is about life, despite her past. Aviva told me about the horrors of the Ghetto, her daily fears as a hidden child, her difficult adjustment back to life with her birth father after the war, and post-war anti semitism, (pause here) But she also told me about her three sons, David, Aaron, and Daniel, and their own achievements and hardships, her love of the ballet which I cannot wait to go see with her in May, her cherished time working at the Apple Corps Theatre, and all of the wonderful friendships with people of all ages that she has formed over the years – of which I am so grateful to be one of. When Aviva told me about the death of her birth mother she followed up with: how lucky am I to have had three mothers? Aviva is an incredible role model for living with joy, even after experiencing hardship we can only imagine.

The Jewish understanding of life is that nothing is perfect, and no one is perfect, but we always have the potential to change or do better. My hope for myself and for everyone here, is to be able to balance accountability to our mistakes, forgiving openly, and living joyfully.