Thoughts for Yom Kippur

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By Rabbi Marc D. Angel

In his essay, “The Condition We Call Exile,” Joseph Brodsky—who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1987—makes a stark observation. “A free man, when he fails, blames nobody.” An essential feature of being a free human being is taking responsibility for one’s actions. Blaming others is a sign of moral and intellectual weakness; it is a sign of a slave mentality.

The Torah provides a candid roadmap guiding us to become responsible, free human beings. It starts with examples of failure!

Adam and Eve eat the forbidden fruit and God confronts them. Eve blames it on the snake. Adam blames it on Eve. Neither takes responsibility. Neither has the moral strength to say: I have failed, I made a mistake, I sinned.

Cain murders Abel and God confronts him. Cain asks “am I my brother’s keeper?” He laments the punishment that God metes out, but he never says: I’m sorry, I did wrong.

The first example in the Torah of someone taking blame for improper behavior is Judah, when he admits that his daughter in law Tamar was righteous and he was in the wrong. (Bereishith 38:26) This sign of personal strength becomes a hallmark of Judah’s personality. It is not by accident that Jacob assigns the role of leadership to him. Judah is the lion of the family.

As the Torah unfolds, we find many examples of sins by individuals and by the people as a whole. In very few instances does anyone take responsibility. But the Torah provides a steady and clear roadmap to personal freedom: repentance.

The Torah calls on us to admit to our sins and faults. It provides a lengthy and detailed list of instructions about sin offerings that were to be brought in the sanctuary. It provides for a Day of Atonement, when we are called upon to confess sins, purify ourselves, admit faults…and resolve to do

better in the future. It is precisely through repentance that we assert our freedom. We stand before God as responsible human beings, not blaming anyone else for our mistakes and misdeeds.

The Torah wants us to be free. It teaches us to shake off the tendency to blame others for our own shortcomings. Slaves and weaklings lack the personal courage to stand up on their own. They succumb to cults and ideologies that foster lies and conspiracy theories against others, whom they blame for all their problems. In so doing, they demonstrate their own lack of good character, their lack of genuine freedom.

Yom Kippur is a gift that God has given to those who follow the Torah. But its message is a gift for all humanity. “A free man, when he fails, blames nobody.” Nobody, that is, except oneself. When one can be honest before God, one is on the road to personal freedom.