

**Yom Kippur 5770**  
**September 28, 2009**  
**Rabbi Adam Grossman**  
**“The ABCs of Closing”**

About nine years ago, following working in Boston with a media company, I came back to Columbus, Ohio. It was a transition period in my life, and I thought it would be fun to do something different, so I decided to work with a friend remodeling homes. I learned simplistic home repair knowledge like painting interiors, patching cracks in walls, repairing toilets, and replacing electrical outlets. A quick note to everyone – always turn the electricity off before replacing an electrical outlet. With a screwdriver and a live wire -- I learned the hard way. In any event, after taking on this apprenticeship, I thought I could fix anything.

About three months into this position, my parents experienced a leak in their basement. Without being aware that mastery in plumbing was much more complicated than fixing a toilet, I quickly volunteered my services believing that I could not only assess, but also remedy their problem. Devoid of much deliberation, I went to the local hardware store and picked up a sledgehammer and quick set concrete – I planned to use the sledgehammer to knock out a wall and the quick set concrete to rebuild it. While I had never done something like this before and really had no idea what I was doing, I was committed to deploying my seemingly vast array of remodeling skills to prove I could. First, I used the sledgehammer to knock out the concrete foundation of my parents’ basement, and there in front of me was a hole about eight feet wide by seven feet tall. Needless to say, I did not find any leaks, or for that matter, any pipes. So, the only thing left to do was to patch up the eight by seven foot hole in the wall. At the time, I had no idea that cinder blocks were necessary, to rebuild a foundation, so just started piling quick set concrete thinking it would form into a wall. As I continue to spackle the cement to the wall, Alec Baldwin’s words in the movie *Glengarry Glen Ross* began to echo in my mind, “ABC. A, Always, B, Be, C, Closing. Always be closing. Always be closing” and I was praying wholeheartedly that this wall would close for if it did not, judgment would surely come.

Throughout Yom Kippur we are reminded of this sales mantra, “Always Be Closing.” For example, *ne’ilah*, our concluding service, means we are closing, or locking, the gates. Traditionally, these gates are emblematic of the heavenly

gates, which upon this evening's shofar blast close for another year. This idea is expanded in the *unatona tokef* found within our liturgy, "On Rosh Hashanah it is written, On Yom Kippur it is sealed." Moving from this metaphorical locking of gates is the closing we find in our hearts through this High Holiday period. At the beginning of Rosh Hashanah, we open the gates found deep within our heart, with introspection and reflection. We are compelled, as Rabbi Arthur Green, a foremost writer of Jewish mysticism, states, to confront "our mortality...examine the value of our lives, ...[and] pray for others dear to us...[until the] final hour, [at ne'ilah] as we realize the inner gates will have to close, we begin to turn from supplication to making peace."<sup>1</sup>

While addressing our internal requests through this period never truly ends, we are challenged to push ourselves during this day to thoroughly evaluate ourselves, which might or might not occur throughout the year asking as Rabbi Marshall I. Meyer in a Yom Kippur essay shares,

Shall we open the gate of compassion?  
The gate of social justice?  
The gate of love?  
The gate of commitment to Judaism?  
The gate of serious Torah study?  
The gate of meditation?  
The gate of prayer?  
The gate of daring to lead more meaningful lives?  
The gate of personal righteousness and more ethical living?  
The gate of risking to love more deeply the people we say we love?  
The gate of courage?  
The gate of action?  
The gate of empathic living?<sup>2</sup>

This day offers us the opportunity to stay focused on improving ourselves throughout the year, ensuring that our convictions are voiced and guaranteeing our personal improvements will not be compromised. How might we do this? My own ABC's of closing – the ABC's of Yom Kippur - Awareness, Belief and Commitment -- Awareness, Belief, and Commitment, which more than Always

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<sup>1</sup> Dov Peretz Elkins – Yom Kippur Readings: Inspiration, Information, Contemplation pg. 288

<sup>2</sup> Dov Peretz Elkins – Yom Kippur Readings: Inspiration, Information, Contemplation pg 297-298

Be Closing, provide us a plan of action as we constantly revisit our pledges through this period of reflection.

There is an old story in which a blind man is sitting on a park bench, when a rabbi sits down next to him. The rabbi is chomping on a piece of matzah and taking pity on the blind man, he breaks off a piece and gives it to him. Several minutes later, the blind man turns, taps the rabbi on the shoulder and asks, "Who wrote this junk?"

Awareness occurs when we realize that everything does not appear as we, personally, see it. Furthermore, it is the recognition that our opinions, our beliefs, and our actions are at times flawed. Being mindful of our deficiencies opens us up to the possibility that we can discover new things about ourselves and appreciate our relationships from fresh perspectives. Awareness, then, ultimately becomes the motivation to improve upon the way we act, the way we love, the way we give, and the way we pray. Even though awareness of our shortfalls provides us a catalyst to take action, we are limited in how we proceed without the belief in a desire to change.

The "This I Believe" project, based on the 1951 Edward Murrow show of the same name, is dedicated to the sharing of individuals' personal stories and core values in 300 to 500 word essays. In explaining the reasons behind the original endeavor, Murrow stated on-air, "We hardly need to be reminded that we are living in an age of confusion—a lot of us have traded in our beliefs for bitterness and cynicism or for a heavy package of despair, or even a quivering portion of hysteria. Opinions can be picked up cheap in the market place while such commodities as courage and fortitude and faith are in alarmingly short supply."<sup>3</sup> Murrow's notions are timeless, and the continuation of the project dares us to confront the beliefs we hold dear. It challenges us to truly think through and express what we value in our life and those around us. Yet, as we know, beliefs are not easily verbalized. They take time and effort to formulate for it is difficult to ask ourselves how we really feel about things such as good and evil, responsibility and Judaism. However, this deep soul-searching provides us an impetus to change. A spoken belief forces us to confront who we are and what we hope to be. Yet, while voicing our beliefs is paramount to self-improvement, without a commitment to acting upon them, our convictions are in vain.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4566554>

Whether in our relationships, our jobs, or our beliefs when the word “commitment” is uttered, many of us are known to run the other way. For many the phobia of commitment is associated with a fear of failure and a fear of shame. Yet, in an apolitical comment, then Senator Barack Obama pronounced in a July 12, 2006 speech, “Making your mark...is hard. If it were easy, everybody would do it. But it's not. It takes patience, it takes commitment, and it comes with plenty of failure along the way. The real test is not whether you avoid this failure, because you won't. It's whether you let it harden or shame you into inaction, or whether you learn from it; whether you choose to persevere.”<sup>4</sup>

Committing to self-improvement is not an easy task. Yet, similar to the creation of a daily regiment or disciplined eating patterns, change happens when we commit to transforming it into habit. Habits take time to fashion, at least 21 days according to “The 21 day theory.” During this period, we might get frustrated, become overwhelmed, or prove unsuccessful. However, if we are truly determined to reshape ourselves following the vows we make today, we must not be afraid of the embarrassment of failure, but rather be prideful in continuing to our ongoing commitment.

Returning to my stint as a home remodeler, or as my parents might suggest home demolisher. Yes, they were angry with me, and yes, they were concerned that a large hole was staring at them from their home's foundation. However, in their judgment of my actions, this is not what upset them the most. With the right person this would all be fixed. Rather staring at this opening, their annoyance stemmed from my arrogance. The arrogance that my self-awareness was so short-sided; the arrogance that my belief in this project was so misguided; the arrogance that my commitment ended with a pile of cement! As we move through this Yom Kippur, we are challenged to confront our egos, to open our hearts, and to accept on-going change in order that we can center on personal betterment.

So as the metaphorical gates close with the *ne'ilah* service this evening, may Yom Kippur's ABC's of closing - Awareness, Belief and Commitment – be our guide through our journeys of change.

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<sup>4</sup> Barack Obama July 12, 2006 speech, [http://www.notablequotes.com/o/obama\\_barack.html](http://www.notablequotes.com/o/obama_barack.html)