

**Rabbi Dennis J. Eisner**  
**Kol Nidre 5770**

**Little Stones**

When I lived in Los Angeles I used to frequent a shopping center near our home in Century City. If you have ever been there you know that this is a beautiful mall, with a parking lot filled with beautiful cars and everywhere you look there are beautiful people. This is a great place for people watching.

Ironically for me it was also a place where I could witness the most public acts of people seeking *t'shuvah*, people seeking forgiveness. I would just sit on the bench that directly faces Tiffany's jewelry store and watch the parade of boyfriends and husbands entering the store with sheepish looks on their faces only to walk out 30 minutes later with their heads held high holding one of the greatest "I am sorry" gifts of all time, "a little blue box."

Trust me. I have been there once or twice myself.

Somewhat in jest and somewhat seriously I often thought about holding a support group right there at the mall. I could set up a kiosk outside of Tiffany's like the guy selling mobile phone accessories – but my kiosk would be for a men's support group. We could discuss what we did wrong, decide what item of jewelry most appropriately fits the crime, embrace in group hugs and practice pulling out our American Express card.

One time I actually saw a close friend taking the walk of shame toward the store. He looked upset as he was about to enter – so I stopped my buddy and asked what was going on? He reluctantly shared with me that he had a fight with his wife and he needed to say he was sorry. I asked him what he did but he couldn't tell me. Not because it was some big secret or because he was ashamed – it was because he was confused. He knew he had done something wrong, because she told him so, but he wasn't sure what it was.

Clearly it wasn't anything major – it was something small – but he could not identify the mistake. I asked him why don't you just talk to her, find out what you did wrong and say I am sorry. He grinned and said "I know this is more expensive but it sure is less painful than trying to figure out what it is that I did wrong.

We have all been there in some way or another, haven't we? We have all messed up and we have all found ourselves trying to figure out what we did and how to make it better.

But let's face it, like my friend, most of us will do almost anything to avoid facing up to our shortcomings even if that means taking the easy way out, even if that means buying diamonds.

Self reflection, self examination is one of the most difficult of all human experiences. It's tough to come to temple on Yom Kippur and admit in front of our families, our friends,

our community, our God and ourselves that we have done something wrong. It's not easy to accept the fact that we are imperfect. It is a delicate dance between our good intentions and our actions. And it is further complicated because so often we don't always know what we did and how to rectify our mistakes. So often we haven't even realized that we made a little mistake; so we don't always know how to repair what we have intentionally or unintentionally done wrong.

There is a famous Chassidic story that took place many years ago during an afternoon study session preceding Yom Kippur. At this study session the Rebbe sat with his three disciples trying to prepare them for the lessons of *t'shuva*, of repentance.

To each disciple, he asked, "What were your sins this year?"

"Rebbe," the first disciple replied, "I know that I sinned one terrible sin this year." "Go then," the Rebbe said to him, "find me one large stone."

The second disciple said, "Rebbe, I sinned a few times this year." "Go then," the Rebbe answered, "and find me four or five stones."

The third disciple approached. "Rebbe I sinned many small times; many little inconsequential things. I can't remember each and every one." "Go then," the Rebbe said to him, "and find me many little stones."

The disciples left and went about their tasks.

When they returned, the Rebbe spoke to them: "My sons" he said: "I now want you to go back to the street," he instructed, "and replace the stones to exactly the same spot from where you took each and every one."

The disciples ran out to complete this task; all but the third returned. He was gone all day. Just moments before the sunset, he ran into *shul*. "Rebbe – Rebbe" he cried, "I tried all day to replace each stone but I simply could not do it."

"So it is with sins," the Rebbe taught: "The large ones are easy to remember thus giving us a better chance to rectify them. But remembering all the little and seemingly inconsequential ones; and correcting them is difficult; it could take a lifetime.

The Rebbe continued; "It's the little things that can burden your life and weigh down your heart."

It's often the little things, isn't it?

Fortunately, most of us don't commit terrible sins. Most of our lives are not made up of giant wrongs. And thankfully, for only some of us, our lives are marked by a number of sizable mistakes.

Understanding this very matter, the great Rabbi Moses Maimonides, better known as the Rambam, instructed us to watch out for the little sins.

He wrote in *Mishnah Torah*: “Do not say that one only repents of sinful deeds such as robbery and theft. Just as one needs to repent of these sins involving acts so one needs to investigate and repent for any evil depositions in one’s character that one may have – for example: a hot temper, hatred, jealousy, quarrelling, scoffing, eager pursuit of wealth or honors, greediness in eating and so on.”<sup>1</sup>

The story of the Chassidic Rebbe and the Rambam’s quote are teaching us to pay attention to our little sins. They are teaching us that we have to remember that our tiny stones are not inconsequential.

“On the contrary” the great Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik taught when he coined the phrase “a trace of something.” He says small sins are not insignificant. Rabbi Soloveitchik explained, “I believe that pardon and forgiveness operate as a trace of something.” In Judaism the small minor details, the quantitatively unimportant factor can be immeasurably significant. “A trace of something” has incredible power. “Like in a chemical compound, one small ingredient often represents the whole.”

So many times we dismiss seemingly small, seemingly inconsequential mistakes only to realize too late that they had a substantial affect on our lives and those around us.

The story I am going to share with you is beyond a doubt one of the most powerful stories that I have ever read. I read it in a collection of High Holy Day writings by Rabbi Jack Reimer. It is a story that has haunted me since.

“There was a Rabbi in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, who officiated at a funeral, and when the service was over, the mourner would not leave the grave. The rabbi tried to help the bereaved man understand that the service was over and he needed to go - but he wouldn’t go.

The Rabbi said: “The service is over now, you have to leave.” But the man shook him off, and said: “You don’t understand. I loved my wife.” The rabbi said: “I am sure you did, but the service is over now. You have to leave.”

The man shook him off again and said: “You don’t understand. I loved my wife.” The rabbi said: I am sure that you did, but still, the service is over. You have to leave.”

The man shook him off again and said: But you don’t understand. I loved my wife – and once I almost told her.”

Can you imagine what pain there must be, can you imagine what shame there must be, if you have to stand at a grave and bid farewell, and realize then what you didn’t say when you could have, when you should have, when there was still time?<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Teshuvah 7:3

<sup>2</sup> Rabbi Jack Reimer, *The World of the High Holy Days*, Vol. 1

The fact is most of us are like the third disciple, our hands full of tiny stones struggling to put them back, to rectify them only to realize that we can't.

It is the little things that weigh us down: the things we never said or forgot to say, or were too shy or too worried to say.

The people we never thanked or took for granted or used or overlooked. The goodbye not said before leaving or parting. The appointments not kept, all the tiny little stones which are difficult to replace.

The phone call never returned, the letter not written, the visit not paid before the call to a funeral, the harsh words spoken and not taken back, the overlooked occasion, the missed opportunity to do something good, all the tiny stones which can never be replaced.

Don't get me wrong. I am not trying to insinuate that our large stones, our larger mistakes are not serious. When we commit these large mistakes we know that they are very serious. However, different from our tiny stones, our large ones are easier to remember.

With that said I believe that one of our most important tasks this High Holy Days season is to own up to our little stones. We cannot – we must not overlook the little stones – those seemingly inconsequential moments when we have missed the mark. The reality is that these little stones fill our pockets and weigh us down.

So that brings us to tonight – because the time is now!

*Erev Yom Kippur - Kol Nidre – Vidui – Al Cheit*

Beginning last week on Rosh Hashanah and for the past ten days our prayers and our traditions have been designed to help us count the trace of something in our lives, our little stones.

On Rosh Hashanah we embarked on the difficult task of actually counting our little stones in order that during our *Yamim Noarim* our ten days of repentance we can begin, or should I say attempt to replace them.

Now after ten days we reconvene in this very room and we beat our chests as we name our sins out loud with the words of *Vidui* – our communal confession and the words *Al Cheit shechatanu lefanecha – For the sins we have committed against you forgives us.*

**Ashamnu** - we should take the teachings of the Rebbe, the Rambam and Rabbi Soloveitchik to heart. **Bagadnu** - it is true that the little things make up the vast majority of our sins and mistakes and it is also true that the little things tell the real story of our failures. **Gazalnu** - little sins mean a lot. Little sins possess *a trace of something*, and they possess incredible power.

Therefore we ought not to choose to live without counting our stones.

For the sins of sarcasm, arrogance, vulgarity, stubbornness, deception, indifference and frivolity - for being rebellious, unjust, and neglectful - for all of our little stones we have gathered – forgive us!

OK. We have gathered our hand full of little stones but this is where it gets tough. You see we still face the same problem as did disciple number three. How do we put them back?

For so many of us a significant stumbling block to repair our lesser mistakes is that it is human nature that we often think that in order to make things better, in order to make up for moments when we have done something wrong, when we have missed the mark, we must do something big or grand to truly show our remorse, to show our sincerity.

We believe we must go to Tiffany's.

Our tradition is wiser than that. It teaches us that as with our “little stones,” our smaller mistakes which are very significant, we must also appreciate the power of smaller acts of *t'shuvah* as being equally important.

“Sometimes a simple manifestation of human kindness, a display of decency towards people, stands on the same plane as a dramatically courageous act. Sometimes, the small, modest, unseen act, the seemingly insignificant deed is precisely the one which fills a higher place than great and renowned heroism.”<sup>3</sup>

Because if it is true that the small stones have great consequences to our lives and the lives of those around us, if it is true that our little sins are where we most often go wrong, then it must also be true the tiniest of kindnesses can set our lives and the world right again.

While we will never be able to replace each stone, we can make an exchange for one small behavior for another. For each small sin, each small little stone, for each “trace of something” there can be a small act of *tikkun olam*— a small act to repair our world.

**A call – a hug – a smile – a note – a visit – a touch – the words, I love you.**

*Mishebeirach Avoteinu V'Imoteinu*

May the God of our Fathers and our Mothers bless us on this Erev Yom Kippur with the strength to be back next year with fewer small mistakes, fewer little stones in our pockets.

*Mishebeirach Avoteinu V'Imoteinu*

May the God of our Fathers and our Mothers bless this New Year - the year in which our little stones - our small mistakes - are replaced by small acts of kindness, each placed gently in our world, our families and our hearts.

*Gmar Chatimah Tovah* - May each of us be inscribed in the book of life

Amen

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<sup>3</sup> Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik