

Sparks

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Do Good. Feel Good.
Do Bad. Feel Bad.

When we do something wrong, we not only violate our relationship with G-d and break a particular law but we also wrong ourselves and damage our self-esteem. Sin is an act of self-betrayal. The Talmud teaches that we cannot do wrong unless a spirit of insanity enters us. Indeed, we have to be out of our minds to transgress G-d's will; who only wants the best for us. Therefore, when we do wrong we have lost ourselves, at least temporarily. We become estranged from our Godly essence, and we are no longer at home with our true selves. After Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit, G-d asked them, "Where are you?" Likewise, when we do wrong we lose ourselves in our self-imposed spiritual exile; we become strangers to ourselves.

When we transgress G-d's will, we violate our G-d-given potential. We experience a schism between who we are and who we ought to be; we feel fragmented and conflicted. Divorced from our inner self and from G-d, we suffer psychic pain and feel spiritually homeless. We live conflicted lives when what we think, do and say do not match our true selves.

Jewish mysticism metaphorically describes sin as taking holy sparks of ourselves and throwing them into exile. Teshuva is the retrieving of those sparks. G-d's forgiveness and pardoning cannot fix the damage we have done to our self-worth. For that we need G-d to redeem us.

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, a great Jewish thinker of the 20th century, describes redemption as restoring our sense of personal adequacy. When we sin, we must first ask G-d to forgive us because we have violated our relationship. We then ask G-d to pardon from having to pay the consequences incurred. But wrongful acts also take a toll on our self-worth. Our failings cause us much loss of self. When we do wrong we are not only being disrespectful to G-d but also to ourselves.

The story of Esau selling his birthright to Jacob is a good example of how transgression causes us to feel like failures. When Esau returns from the field and sees Jacob brewing a bean stew, he says to him, "Pour that red stuff down my throat because I am tired" (Genesis; 25:30). The commentator Rashi points out that the Hebrew word for pour — *halisani*- is a term used for describing the feeding of a horse. In other words, Esau referred to himself in a derogatory manner. Rashi also highlights that Esau said that he wanted the stew because he was **tired** but not because he was hungry. Quoting the oral tradition, Rashi explains that Esau was tired because that whole day he was busy raping and killing. In other words, sin exhausts a person.

A person may work in a comfortable air-conditioned office, but if she feels that her work does not fit her, she will feel exhausted. Behaving in ways that contradict our Godly inner-self is exhausting even if we are not doing wrong just not doing what is right for us. This is all the more so when we do wrong.

However, when we act in ways that befit our Godliness we bring great vitality to ourselves. It is likely that Esau was tired because he was depressed. When we behave in ways that contradict our divine inner self, we feel inadequate, depressed and tired. It is at these times that we do insane things like Esau did when he ended up selling Jacob his birthright for a pot of beans (Genesis; 25:31-34).

The prophet Hosea (14:2) calls, "Return, Israel, unto G-d, for you have failed in your transgressions." Hosea did not say, "you have fallen," but rather, "you have failed." In other words, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik explains, we are not just sinners — we are failures. Our wrongdoings have made spiritual cripples out of us. We failed existentially, not just religiously.

When we do wrong we wrong ourselves. When we do bad we end up feeling bad about ourselves. But when we do good — we feel good.

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