

If at first you don't succeed, try, try, try again.

As we approach the High Holidays again we could be forgiven for feeling a certain sense of déjà vu. After all, didn't we do this last year? It may seem like a funny question but in the case of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur it is particularly relevant. When we celebrate Passover or Chanukah every year, we are reminding ourselves yearly of a great event in our nation's history and the resonance it has on our religious life today; and when we celebrate Sukkot every year we celebrate the natural cycles of nature and agriculture. But when we come to Yom Kippur we return every year to do teshuvah, to repent. But one could easily think that had we done our job right the previous year we wouldn't need to be here again this year. Surely the fact that we still have sins, some old, some new, indicates that we fell short in our previous year's repentance?

But of course this is not, or should not, be how we approach the High Holidays. This way of thinking assumes an ideal of human nature that is not reflected in reality – that we can be perfect. Judaism considers perfection to be the realm of God and Heaven. Here on Earth however, perfection is not and cannot be the goal of our lives. No human being can be perfect – even the most honest person will be tempted to lie; even the most disciplined person will let their self control slip once in a while.

But our tradition does not ask perfection of us. Rather it expects improvement. It expects us to learn from our experiences and try to avoid repeating our mistakes. But it recognizes that this is a long process, one in which there are almost as many steps back as there are steps forward.

And so Yom Kippur comes every year, not to make us feel bad that despite strenuous repentance last year, we have nevertheless fallen into many of the same moral traps and even found some new ones but rather to remind us that we are only human. We remember that the goal is not the destination – to be free of sin – but the journey. The Pirke Avot, the Sayings of our Fathers, notes in a construction analogy that it is not our duty to complete the building work, but nor are we free to desist from it. The fact that we can never achieve perfection does not mean that we should not work every year to improve ourselves. It means that we work to become better, more compassionate and more ethical people than we were the year before and strive every year, not towards perfection, but towards being the best we can be as Jews and human beings.

Rabbi Emanuel