

What We Can Change

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On December 17, 1862, General Ulysses S. Grant issued the infamous “General Orders No. 11,” which “stipulated that ‘the Jews, as a class, violating every regulation of trade established by the Treasury Department, ... are hereby expelled’ from the vast portion of the western Confederacy that Grant had conquered. “It was,” in the words of Grant biographer Ron Chernow, “the most sweeping anti-Semitic action...in American history,” albeit one that President Lincoln promptly reversed. As Chernow explains, Grant expressed a “conspiratorial” view of Jews “with almost diabolical powers,” repeating age-old antisemitic stereotypes of Jews as unscrupulous money-grubbers.ⁱ

In 1868, as a candidate for president, Grant’s advisors urged him to confront his antisemitic past. His apology was thorough. Chernow elaborates: “To Isaac Morris, who was Jewish, he [wrote,] ‘I have no prejudice against sect or race but want each individual to be judged by his own merit.’ He admitted that General Orders No. 11 ‘does not sustain this sentiment...but then I do not sustain that Order.’”ⁱⁱ

The apology would be a first step, but it would not be sufficient to redress Grant’s wrongdoing. Chernow highlights that, while leading the country in a time when antisemitism and racism remained rampant, “Grant made extraordinary strides in naming blacks, Jews, and Native Americans to federal positions.”ⁱⁱⁱ Remarking on the appointment of a Jewish man as governor of the territory that is now the state of Washington, Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise, founder of our American Reform Movement, gushed “that *President* Grant has revoked *General* Grant’s notorious order No. 11.”^{iv}

Grant’s most direct repentance for General Orders No. 11 came in confronting Russia, when it forcibly relocated thousands of Jewish families on trumped-up smuggling charges, an act strikingly similar to Grant’s own wartime antisemitism. Confronting Russia, he wrote: ‘It is too late, in this age of enlightenment, to persecute any one on account of race, color or religion.’^v

We have gathered here on this most solemn evening—not, of course, to study American history—but to contemplate and confess our own wrongdoing and to commit to changing our ways. The work of this Holy Day is hard. More difficult still is following through on our repentance—each of us becoming, through our **actions**, the better person Yom Kippur demands us to be.

In the Talmud, Rabbi Yehuda is asked what is required to demonstrate that a person has truly repented. His answer: That the person be confronted time and again with a circumstance in which they sinned in the past—but now, they do what is right and keep far from sin.^{vi}

That kind of change is hard. We may be tempted to despair. Much about our character and personality is deeply ingrained, with behavior and misbehavior repeated in various guises from early childhood through senior adulthood.

Tonight, I ask that we cast aside that despair. Let us focus on what we **can** change. Grant reversed his antisemitism, not merely in word but in deed. Having used his power to expel Jews in the past, he later had the opportunity as President to harm Jews in America or to promote them; and this time, he did the right thing. He also confronted ethnic cleansing of Jews on precisely the pretense that had prompted his own misdeed. He went out of his way, even at the risk of other foreign policy priorities,^{vii} and fought international antisemitism. His actions demonstrated that his apology was not empty. He had changed.

Grant is not alone. And each of us can be next.

The Talmud tells the story of Rabbi Elazar, who was both a great Torah scholar and a terribly arrogant man. One day, he saw a man he considered to be hideously ugly, a thought he should have kept to himself. Instead, Rabbi Elazar said, “Worthless person, ...Are all the people of your city as ugly as you?” The man replied, ‘I do not know, but you should go and say that to the artisan who made me’” Rabbi Elazar promptly recognized his wrongdoing. The “artisan,” of course, is God. Elazar immediately came down off his donkey and asked forgiveness; but the “ugly” man was not so easily appeased. Rabbi Elazar attempted to demonstrate newfound humility, walking behind the “ugly” man until they came to Elazar’s hometown. The people of the city beg the “ugly” man to forgive their rabbi, which he ultimately agrees to do—not for Elazar’s sake, but for the people’s—and even then, only if Elazar would vow never to behave like that again.^{viii}

The Talmud does not tell us what Elazar did when he encountered the next person he considered ugly. We do learn, however, that he took a significant step to counteract his own arrogance, which was at the root of his sin. Having been offered forgiveness at last, Elazar’s very next act was to teach, “A person should always be soft like a reed, not stiff like a cedar, as one who is proud like a cedar is prone to sin. By contrast, due to its gentle qualities, the reed was rewarded: The quill that is used to write a Torah scroll is taken from it.^{ix} Having gone so publicly

on the record against arrogance, Elazar would find it hard to sin through haughtiness again.

We are not generals or presidents, or even Torah scholars, present company included. And yet, we have much in common with Ulysses S. Grant and Rabbi Elazar. We sin. We say and do things we soon regret. We hurt other people. We feel terribly guilty. Hopefully, we apologize.

What matters most, though, is what comes next. Do we change our ways? That is the hard part.

Larry Trapp was also neither a president nor a rabbi. By contrast, he was “the Grand Dragon of the KKK for the Realm of Nebraska.” Some thirty years ago, Trapp left hateful, threatening messages for Black and Jewish leaders in his town—Lincoln, Nebraska—including Cantor Michael Weisser. The Cantor called the police, but that was not all he did. Having learned that this “Grand Dragon” was disabled, the Cantor and his wife Julie told Trapp that the Nazis had murdered handicapped people even before they sought to annihilate the Jews. One time, when Trapp called their home, the Weissers offered to help him with errands. Before long, Trapp resolved to change his ways. The Weissers helped him leave the Klan, and Trapp spoke out against white supremacy. Later, Trapp even converted to Judaism, and he is buried in a Jewish cemetery.^x

If I have made Larry Trapp’s repentance sound easy, it was not. He abandoned all that he had been, the people who had filled his life, and all that he had known for many years. Change, turning away from wrongdoing, is never simple. But Trapp had partners, the Weissers. And he found the strength within himself to become a good person.

On this Kol Nidre night, let us be inspired by Ulysses S. Grant, by Rabbi Elazar, and by Larry Trapp. Judaism does not insist that we never sin, that we never say or do wrong. Instead, our faith teaches us to confess, to apologize, and not to repeat our evil deeds. To be gentle like reeds, prepared to bend when we need to change. As each of us reaches into our hearts tonight, identifying where we have gone wrong, let us resolve to transform our evil into good. Let us admit our transgressions. And let us seek repentance—through our words, and so much more importantly, through our lives.

Amen.

ⁱ Ron Chernow, *Grant*, New York: Penguin Books, 2017, 233.

ⁱⁱ Chernow, 620.

ⁱⁱⁱ Chernow, 641.

^{iv} Chernow, 643. Emphasis original.

^v Chernow, p. 643.

^{vi} Yoma 86b.

^{vii} Chernow, p. 643.

^{viii} Ta'anit 20b.

^{ix} *Ibid.*

^x Information gathered from Daniel S. Levy, "The Cantor and the Rabbi," an interview with Larry Trapp and Michael Weisser, *Time*, February 17, 1992; and "We the People: Nebraska and the Klan," Nebraska State Historical Society, [We The People: Nebraska and the Ku Klux Klan \(nebraskahistory.org\)](http://nebraskahistory.org).