

## What We Cannot Change

Yom Kippur 5782

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We gather today to confess our sins. We resolve to change in the new year. That's a herculean task at best—most of our wrongdoing is related to patterns of personality and behavior, deeply-ingrained—requiring a lifetime of work, much more than a single day, to redress.

Some people have it harder. Mental illness, including substance use disorder, often leads to behavior that we may categorize, correctly or not, as wrongdoing, even sin.

I know that from personal experience. I have long been treated for an anxiety disorder, pretty effectively. Still, when I am anxious, I can behave impatiently, sometimes sharply and unkindly. When I have my anxiety back under control, I apologize. Often, the person I've hurt is understanding. Still, damage is done. The relationship may be harmed.

I seek forgiveness at this season and on this holy day, often with a painful feeling of déjà vu. I have confessed similar sins repeatedly, and I despair of ever reaching a Yom Kippur when I will not.

People with substance use disorders face a much greater challenge.

Alcoholism was not well understood as a disease until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century<sup>i</sup>—and even then, much of society continued to regard alcoholics as “drunks.” Ulysses S. Grant battled alcoholism throughout his life, 100 years before it was known to be an illness. As biographer Ron Chernow explains, Grant worked hard, and ultimately successfully, to combat his unhealthy urges—but he never escaped the reputation of being a “drunk.” Grant, a West Point graduate and Mexican-American War hero, was forced to resign from the Army in the mid-1850s because of his drinking. When he sought a commission at the outset of the Civil War, his reputation preceded him, and he was initially saddled with lowly, even insulting, posts. Only tremendous military success enabled his rise to leadership.<sup>ii</sup>

Grant and the two people closest to him—his wife Julia and his chief of staff, General John Rawlins—understood the disease he faced. They knew that he was incapable of moderate drinking and therefore needed to stay away from alcohol altogether. Still, far from the battlefield and from the watchful eyes of Julia and Rawlins, Grant would go on benders, widely reported in the press. More often, he would turn his wine and champagne glasses upside down, publicly signaling that he did not take any alcoholic beverage. Even with the greatest effort and a

good deal of success at overcoming his addiction, Grant's reputation as a "drunk" dogged him throughout his life. The charge of drunkenness was used against him in both of his successful presidential elections, even though he was no longer drinking.<sup>iii</sup>

Nevertheless, with his iron will and extraordinary partners in Julia and General Rawlins, Grant achieved sobriety. What he could change and did was so much more important than what he could not.

Sometimes, even the most committed and loving partners are not sufficient to save the life of a person stricken with substance use disorder. We have seen that in the opioid epidemic that has touched all of our lives, some much more intimately than others.

Hoping to help others, Judy has shared her story, and the life and death of her beloved son Steve, through the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: "Judy's son Steve was a loving son, fiancé, brother, uncle, cousin, nephew, and friend. Steve, a gifted musician, also excelled in sports. He earned Dean's List status in college, and a degree in economics that led to a successful career as a financial advisor. Steve suffered a back injury as an adult that left him with severe constant pain that doctors were unable to successfully treat. He became depressed due to the impact of the pain on his way of life. He was prescribed antidepressants which helped, but did not eliminate, his symptoms. Steve was then given a prescription for opioids.

"Steve was thrilled that a medication finally seemed to be working, but he quickly became addicted to the prescription opioids. Within three years, he was seeking out multiple doctors to fill new prescriptions. Steve eventually acknowledged his addiction and tried hard to get well. He enrolled in rehabilitation and treatment programs, but the grip of his addiction had taken an incredibly strong hold. Following completion of a 28-day addiction treatment program, Steve relapsed and died of an overdose at the age of 43.

"After the loss of her son, Judy found a note he had written about his experience with prescription opioids: 'At first they were a lifeline. Now they are a noose around my neck.'<sup>iv</sup>

Tragically, we know that Judy's and Steve's story reflects those of hundreds of thousands who have lost their lives to opioid addiction and of the family members and friends who have not met with the ultimate success that Julia and Ulysses Grant and John Rawlins achieved. Sometimes, the addiction is simply too

powerful—and notably, as harmful as alcohol can be, opioids are stronger and even more addictive.

Blessedly, millions of Americans have survived opioid addiction. It is not a certain death sentence, even if no formula of treatment, will to live, and the support of friends and family can guarantee recovery. Still, survivors may be left with fragile mental health, guilt over their behavior under the influence, and damaged reputations. And they will always be addicts, however long in recovery. That cannot be changed. And yet, all who have maintained their sobriety will attest: Accepting what they cannot change facilitates healing that becomes life's greatest blessing.

Yom Kippur does not ask us to change what we cannot. God does not command the impossible. We are, however, reminded of important duties today:

We are all enjoined to identify our harmful behavior and to do what we can to address it.

Each of us, too, should be eager to partner with loved ones and friends who cannot eliminate the challenges they face. People living with mental illness, including substance use disorder, deserve our compassion and our collaboration in their quests for healing. My office door, my cell phone, and my inbox are always open to those who need a pastoral ear, a prayer, or a referral on the path to recovery.

No, we cannot be responsible for other people's problems, not even for those closest to us. In some instances, particularly when our help has been rejected, preserving our own wellbeing requires that we set limits, even painful ones, to prevent loved ones' addictions from negatively impacting us.

And, even in the worst of circumstances, we must seek to be forgiving—of ourselves and of others—particularly for what we cannot change. Perhaps we can even embrace the flaws that are part of what makes us human.

Dan Nichols, who has composed much of the contemporary Jewish music that we enjoy here at Temple, has written a meaningful English interpretation of our prayer book's morning blessings, praising God for our bodies and for our souls. Nichols' poetic lyrics express how each of us may embrace even the most difficult aspects of ourselves as part of a magnificent whole:

I thank You for my life, body and soul.

Help me realize I am beautiful and whole.

I'm perfect the way I am and a little broken too.

I will live each day as a gift I give to you.<sup>v</sup>

Today is Yom Kippur. None of us is off the hook. We are obligated to change what we can, even when related to sadly immutable aspects of who we are. And then, as the day comes to a close, let each of us love ourselves and one another as we are, “perfect and a little broken too.”

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Tanya Albert Henry, “Court Listened to AMA on defining alcoholism as a disease, not a crime,” *AMA Advocacy Update*, August 16, 2016, [Court listened to AMA on defining alcoholism as a disease, not a crime | American Medical Association \(ama-assn.org\)](https://www.ama-assn.org/advocacy/court-listened-to-ama-on-defining-alcoholism-as-a-disease-not-a-crime).

<sup>ii</sup> Ron Chernow, *Grant*, New York: Penguin Books, 2017.

<sup>iii</sup> Chernow.

<sup>iv</sup> Judy, Rx Awareness, *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, [Judy | Rx Awareness | CDC Injury Center](https://www.cdc.gov/injury/our-work/rx-awareness/).

<sup>v</sup> Dan Nichols, *Asher Yatzar*. Suggested by Rabbi Jordi Schuster Battis, Central Conference of American Rabbis High Holy Sermon webinar, August 4, 2021.