

The K.F. Stone Weekly

(Formerly "Beating the Bushes")



September 07, 2014

SINNING WHILE WEARING A HALO

This week, former Virginia Governor Bob McDonnell was found guilty on eleven counts of federal corruption; his wife Maureen, guilty of nine counts. For those who have been out of touch the past several weeks, the McDonnells were indicted on fourteen counts of conspiracy, bribery, and extortion for allegedly taking more than \$177,000 in gifts, junkets, and cash from one Jonnie Williams, the smarmy head of a company that made a tobacco-derived dietary supplement



called Anatabloc. Before going to trial, prosecutors offered Governor McDonnell a peach of a deal: if he pleaded guilty to a single count of fraud, all charges against his wife would be dropped and he would get off with the legal equivalent of a slap on the wrist. Inexplicably, McDonnell and his legal team turned the offer down. Instead, they mounted a shamelessly bizarre

defense; one in which they claimed that Maureen -- and Maureen alone -- was the guilty culprit, a "frosty harridan with a roving eye and a lamentable inability to manage the staff." One former aide portrayed her as a screaming tyrant and acknowledged calling her a "nutbag." Moreover, the defense argued that the McDonnell's marriage -- always presumed to be as loving and idyllic as that of, say, Ward and June Cleaver, was inextricably broken. There was so little communication between the couple, the defense argued, that it would have been virtually impossible for them to agree to a shopping list, let alone to conspire as legal charges against them insisted.

At the end of a long salacious trial, the jury quickly convicted the McDonnells on a combined twenty counts, wanting, in the words of Politico's [Dahlia Lithwick](#), ". . . nothing more than to loofah off the filth and go home." The McDonnells could face lengthy prison sentences -- up to thirty years -- and hefty fines. Sentencing is scheduled to take place January 6, 2015. Defense attorney Hank Asbill told reporters the McDonnells will appeal the sentence. As he departed the federal court in Richmond, a visibly shaken Bob McDonnell made but a single comment: "All I can say is my trust belongs in the Lord."

How stunningly apropos.

Throughout his 22-year political career, McDonnell -- like many of his contemporaries -- has presented himself as a "man of values" who stands foursquarely for Biblical principles. Like many of his contemporaries, he has paraded his smiling, clear-eyed picture-perfect family before the cameras. He is rigorously pro-life; at one time he supported a bill requiring any woman seeking an abortion to first undergo a Transvaginal ultrasound. Although he eventually moderated the stance just a bit, pro-choice advocates began calling him either "Governor Vagina" or "Governor Ultrasound." He has been a strong proponent of "[Covenant Marriage](#)," and criticized the landmark *Griswold v Connecticut* decision in which the Supreme Court ruled that a state's ban on the use of contraceptives violated the right to marital privacy. McDonnell's 1989 thesis at the Rev. Pat Robertson's Regent University, which was entitled *The Republican Party's Vision for the Family: The Compelling Issue of The Decade*, contained a 15-point conservative agenda which included opposition to abortion, support for school vouchers and covenant marriage, as well as tax policies favoring heterosexual families. In that thesis, McDonnell wrote that "government policy should favor married couples over cohabitators, homosexuals or fornicators" and described working women and feminists as 'detrimental' to the family. Like many of his contemporaries, McDonnell saw fit to transfer a campaign against sin and in favor of a return to "old-time family values" from the pulpit to the polling place.



Turns out, however, Bob McDonnell was both a sinner and a criminal. Perhaps in his mind his actions were permissible because, although a sinner, he wore a halo.

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In 2012, Bob McDonnell was on the vice presidential short-list; in 2014 he is a convicted felon facing the possibility of spending his remaining years (he is currently 60 years old) in prison. A Biblical verse from the Book of Samuel II (1:27) comes to mind:

איך נפלו גבורים

Namely, "*Oh how the mighty have fallen.*"

Of course, Bob McDonnell isn't the only fallen warrior. Over the past generation, the political landscape has been littered with office holders who sinned despite wearing a halo. A handful of the more memorable would include:

- **Senator Larry Craig** (R-ID) caught in a gay sting operation in a Minn. bathroom.
- **Senator David Vitter** (R-LA), found to have been a client of prostitutes in D.C. & Louisiana.
- **Senator John Edwards** (D-NC) who John Kerry at one point called "a man who understands and defends the values of America," had an affair with - - and fathered a child by -- videographer Rielle Hunter while his wife Elizabeth was dying of cancer.
- **Rep. Anthony Weiner** (D-NY) resigned his office when it was discovered that the newly-married congressman was "sexting" -- sending explicit sexual material by cell phone.
- **Rep. Scott Desjarlais, M.D.** (R-TN) a Tea Party favorite who referred to himself as "a consistent supporter of pro-life family values," was found to have cheated with his coworkers and his own patients; of having written false prescriptions for one of his mistresses to get drugs, and of pressuring his own wife to get an abortion -- twice. (Desjarlais is still in office, although he won his most recent primary by a scant 38 votes.)
- **Senator Gary Hart** (D-CO): While running for the Democratic nomination in 1987, rumors began swirling that was having an extramarital affair. He responded to the rumors by daring the press corps: "*Follow me around. I don't care. I'm serious. If anybody wants to put a tail on me, go ahead. They'll be very bored.*" He was discovered to be having an affair with a model named Donna Rice.

OK. Point made. Politicians from both sides of the aisle have been "caught with their pants down," both literally and figuratively. But -- and its a tremendously big "but" -- there is one glaring difference between most, if not all, of the Democratic sinners and their Republican counterparts. Few, if indeed any, of the Democrats made family values, personal rectitude or religiosity a lynchpin of their campaigns or careers. Republicans, on the other hand, frequently run as if

they were God's chosen candidate; as paragons of virtue and upholders of old-time morality. Wearing their halos and setting themselves high atop the ladder of moral conduct, is it any wonder that when they go the way of all flesh, it is a far, far bigger shock?

Let's face it: we are all prone to human weakness. Some religious traditions teach that man is born in sin and can only be redeemed through rebirth. As a Jew, I was taught (and teach) that man is inherently good, but that we all have within us a *yetzer tov* -- an inclination to do or be good -- and a *yetzer ra* -- an evil inclination. Life, we are taught is a battle between these two inclinations. Interestingly, when the term *yetzer* -- inclination -- is used by itself, it is understood to mean the evil inclination. Why? Because it is the exception, not the rule. Seems to be a pretty realistic assessment.

From where I stand, I think candidates and office holders ought to think twice -- if not more -- before presenting themselves as halo-wearing saints and paragons of virtue. You are running for nomination, not beatification. (Yes, I know, I've used that line before . . . and I'm sure I'll use it again.) If I were you, I would tether my religious *bona fides* to the pew. As Grandpa Doc used to say, "If heaven were meant just for saints, it would probably be close to empty . . ."

Politics and political campaigns are meant for issues -- real issues -- and not for legislating sectarian morality or promoting a return to the past. But if you must include how moral, how religious, how virtuous you are -- and then fall into the clutches of sin -- remember that your halo won't do you a bit of good.

In the Talmud (*Kiddushin 40a*) we read:

**אמר רבי אלעאי הזקן אם רואה אדם שיצרו מתגבר עליו ילך למקום שאין מכירין
אותו וילבש שחורים ויתכסה שחורים ויעשה כמו שלבו חפץ ואל יחלל שם שמים
בפרהסיא**

Namely: "*Rabbi Elai the elder teaches: If a person sees that his inclination is overpowering him, he should travel to a place where they do not know him, dress in black, wrap himself in black, and do what his heart desires, and not profane the Divine name in public.*"

And by the way, if you've just *got* to sin, please do remember that it's probably best to take your halo off first . . .

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September 14, 2014

THE FINE LINE BETWEEN HEROES AND HOOLIGANS

Once there was a time when the daily sports section was filled with scores, standings and stats. I for one loved nothing more than sipping my early morning cuppa hot Earl Grey while drinking in yesterday's box scores and

tomorrow's pitching match-ups; of learning who scored the winning touchdown; whether anyone had achieved a triple-double; which teams were leading their divisions. Nowadays, I am sorry to report, the daily sports pages more closely resemble a police blotter than a chronicle of athletic achievement. The line between heroism and hooliganism has become as indistinguishable as a chalk yard marker in the fourth quarter of a game played during a snowy blizzard.

(Note: The box score on the left is from Sandy Koufax's 4th no-hitter, a masterful perfect game he pitched against the Chicago Cubs on September 10, 1965.)

The Box Score

CHICAGO (N.)					LOS ANGELES (N.)					
	ab.	r.	h.	bi		ab.	r.	h.	bi	
Young, cf	3	0	0	0	Wills, ss	3	0	0	0	
Beckert, 2b	3	0	0	0	Gilliam, 3b	3	0	0	0	
Williams, rf	3	0	0	0	Kennedy, 3b	0	0	0	0	
Santo, 3b	3	0	0	0	Davis, cf	3	0	0	0	
Banks, 1b	3	0	0	0	Johnson, lf	2	1	1	0	
Browne, lf	3	0	0	0	Fairly, rf	2	0	0	0	
Krug, c	3	0	0	0	Lefebvre, 2b	3	0	0	0	
Kessinger, ss	2	0	0	0	Tracewski, 2b	3	0	0	0	
Amalfitano, ph	1	0	0	0	Parker, 1b	3	0	0	0	
Hendrix, p	2	0	0	0	Torborg, c	3	0	0	0	
Kuenn, ph	1	0	0	0	Koufax, p	2	0	0	0	
Totals	27	0	0	0	Totals	24	1	1	0	
Chicago	0	0	0	0	Chicago	0	0	0	0	
Los Angeles	0	0	0	1	Los Angeles	0	1	0	1	
<p>E—Krug. LOB—Chicago 0, Los Angeles 1.</p> <p>2B—Johnson. SB—Johnson. S—Fairly.</p>										
IP. H. R. ER. BB. SO.										
Hendley (L, 2-3)	8	1	1	0	1	3				
Koufax (W, 22-7)	9	0	0	0	0	14				
1—1.43. A—29,139.										

Ravens running back Ray Rice. This past March, Rice, who is the Ravens' second all-time rushing leader (behind Jamal Lewis) was arrested and subsequently

indicted for third-degree aggravated assault relating to an incident where he punched his then-fiancée (now wife) in the face. The blow knocked her unconscious. The incident became a prominent controversy after TMZ released a video of the encounter, which led to an NFL policy change regarding how it handles domestic violence cases. Rice's contract was terminated by the Ravens on September 8, 2014, following the release of an additional video of the incident. Ravens' management also began encouraging their fans to exchange their Rice jerseys for other Ravens jerseys at their official team store. The incident has also led to questions about what NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell knew, and when he knew it.

Ray Rice is but one of many, many professional athletes whose actions have turned the sports page into a police blotter. Consider just the cases of NFL players arrested since July 4 -- a mere ten weeks ago:

- 9/13/14 (yesterday): **Vikings RB Adrian Peterson** surrendered on charges of reckless or negligent injury to a child.
- 8/31/14: **49ers DE Ray McDonald** was arrested for domestic violence.
- 8/20/14: **Steelers RB Le'Veon Bell** was arrested for marijuana possession and DUI.
- 7/21/14: **Eagles S Keelan Johnson** was arrested for assaulting a police officer, passively resisting arrest, and disorderly conduct.
- 7/20/14: **Rams LB Jo-Lonn Dunbar** was arrested for battery and disorderly conduct.
- 7/12/14: **Ravens CB Jimmy Smith** was arrested for disorderly conduct.
- 7/4/14: **Browns WR Josh Gordon** was arrested for DUI in North Carolina.

And this is just from the world of professional football. It does not take into account other professional sports -- both team and individual -- or anything on the college level. And believe me, the numbers are staggering.

Ever since the days of the first Olympians, athletes have been heroes to people of all ages. To a certain extent it is perfectly understandable. For these men and women can run faster, throw harder -- and straighter -- jump higher and possess far better hand-eye coordination than 99% of the public. Additionally, they are frequently magnificent freaks of nature. And today, even the mediocre ones make more money in a single season than most of us can even dream of making in a lifetime. As but one example, before he was indicted on triple murder charges, the New England Patriots signed tight end Aaron Hernandez to a 7-year, \$41 million contract. The contract, which guaranteed Hernandez a minimum of \$16.5 million, came with a \$12.5 million signing bonus. Once Hernandez was indicted -- and held in jail without bail -- the Patriots voided the

contract. "That's an insane amount of money for just catching a football," you say. "No one is worth that much." But the fact of the matter is that Hernandez -- and all the other insanely high-paid athletes *are* worth it . . . to their teams, their sponsors and the networks who broadcast their games. Otherwise these billionaire owners wouldn't be signing them to such fat, fat contracts.

Sadly, Aaron Hernandez is hardly *suis generis*. Those who have followed sports over the past generation will no doubt be familiar with such former heroes-turned hooligans as [Ray Carruth](#), [Robert Rozier](#), [Ugueth Urbina](#), [Dave Meggett](#), [Mel Hall](#), [Michael Vick](#), [Lenny Dykstra](#), and of course O.J. Simpson. All have -- or are still -- been imprisoned from crimes ranging from drugs and murder to kidnapping and assault.



Without question, there *are* many upstanding professional athletes; men and women who are well educated, well-adjusted citizens who give back to the communities which have showered them with riches and adulation. But for every Bill Bradley (Princeton), Calvin Hill (Yale), Lou Gehrig (Columbia) or Brad Ausmus (Dartmouth) there are many many more who are ill-prepared for the acclaim and notoriety, the allurements and instant riches of athletic stardom. From their earliest days, pro-athletes-in-the-making are treated with kid gloves because they have these special physical gifts. They are sheltered and coddled, and become accustomed to having spotlights shining in their eyes. All too frequently, their sins and trespasses are swept under the rug. And when -- as inevitably it must -- the spotlights grow dark, a high percentage of them are left defenseless; babes in the woods who are woefully lacking the most basic of life skills. Recent statistics bear this out: [A Sports Illustrated article](#) reports a grim reality -- 78 percent of NFL players face bankruptcy or serious financial stress within just two years of leaving the game; 60 percent of NBA players face the same dire results in five years; major league baseball players are four times more likely to file for bankruptcy than the average citizen. Precisely why this is the case is hard to pin down. Suffice it to say the "dumb jock" stereotype is both overblown and insufficient.

There has long been a tendency to believe that professional athletes are far above average -- but on steroids! And, truth to tell, they *are* stratospherical above average when it comes to physical and certain mental skills. They are wired differently than you and me. Research has found significant differences between athletes and non-athletes across personality characteristics such as inhibition, emotionality, and aggressiveness. Good characteristics on the field of play, they don't necessarily translate well to everyday life. Then too, professional athletes

are more present focused than future focused as compared to non-athletes. In other words, there is much greater emphasis placed on today than there is on tomorrow. When the spotlight goes out, the game has been concluded and the adulation has ceased, that's when the realities of everyday life finally begin. For many, its the first time; in so many cases, these world-class athletes have never learned the most basic life skills.

As JFK once said, "Success has many fathers, but failure is an orphan."

Is it any wonder how easy it is for so many heroes to cross over that fine line and become hooligans? We cheer every violent hit, every teeth-jarring tackle and then wonder why they act so violently off the field.

It would serve us all well to keep in mind that these idols have cleats of clay. To some extent, we bear a bit of responsibility for their trajectory of failure. In placing professional athletes high atop the Mt. Olympus of competitive sport, we are inevitably, helping create their downward path -- a road filled with dangerous ruts and rills.

And now, having concluded this piece, I'm off to catch today's opening kickoff . .
. Go Fish!

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September 22, 2014

E UNUM PLURIBUS?

This past Thursday the people of Scotland voted on whether their country should break away from the United Kingdom. Voters from the Shetlands to the Borders and from Glasgow to the Scottish Glens came out by the millions -- an astounding 85% of them. In the end, a solid but not overwhelming 55% of the country decided to keep the now 307-year union between the two countries intact.

Just days before the historic vote, British P.M. David Cameron, facing a backlash



among some of his Conservative Party colleagues, promised greater powers and autonomy if Scots would but reject dissolution of their historic union. At this early juncture, it is difficult to know precisely how much of an affect the P.M.'s concessionary promises had on the final vote. What is known, however, is that Scottish independence is likely dead for the next generation. And, just this morning

(Monday Sept. 22), Reuters reported Cameron as saying that there were "no ifs, no buts" about Scotland being granted greater autonomy.

At virtually the same time Scots were debating the wisdom of independence, Reuters was asking Americans how they would feel about seceding today, not from the United Kingdom, but from the mother country they left England to

create 238 years ago. The exact wording of the question was, "Do you support or oppose the idea of your state peacefully withdrawing from the United States of America and the federal government?"

Without question, what the poll numbers reveal is unsettling:

- Some 23.9% of Americans polled from Aug. 23 through Sept. 16 said they strongly supported or tended to support the idea of their state breaking away.
- 53.3% of the 8,952 respondents strongly opposed or tended to oppose the notion.

While at first glance these figures don't seem too terribly alarming, a deeper look reveals a nation at odds with the notion of union. In analyzing the figures, Reuters' Jim Gaines reported that *"Secession got more support from Republicans than Democrats, more from right- than left-leaning independents, more from younger than older people, more from lower- than higher-income brackets, more from high school than college grads. But there was a surprising amount of support in every group and region, especially the Rocky Mountain states, the Southwest and the old Confederacy, but also in places like Illinois and Kansas. And of the people who said they identified with the Tea Party, supporters of secession were actually in the majority, with 53 percent."*



When asked what was causing them to actively consider seceding from the Union, respondents cited a variety of issues:

- Anger with President Obama's handling of health care reform;
- The rise of Islamic State militants;
- Long-running Washington gridlock;
- A general feeling that states handle problems far better than Washington.

One respondent, Roy Gustafson of Camden, South Carolina, who lives on disability payments, told the Reuters' pollster, "The state would be better off handling things on its own." (*One wonders if Mr. Gustafson has considered that were South Carolina to actually secede, his disability payments would likely suffer a dramatic cut. In the Palmetto State, federal aid as a percentage of state general revenue is 38.1%.*)

In Texas -- which has long had an activist group calling for the state legislature to put the secession question on a statewide ballot -- one respondent said he was confident his state could get by without the rest of the country. "Texas has everything we need. We have manufacturing, we have the oil, and we don't need them," said Mark Denny, a 59-year old retiree living outside Dallas on disability payments. (*In Texas, it should be noted federal aid as a percentage of state revenue is a whopping 40% -- the 11th highest figure in the country.*)

OK. So people are angry . . . and confused and dissatisfied and, in many cases totally unrealistic. Let's look at Texas a bit further; they seem to be at the forefront of the secession movement. Assuming that they could separate from the United States of America and become an independent nation, who would their likely leaders be? When one considers who some of the leading, best-known political figures in the Lone Star State are, one shudders:

- **Representative Louie Gohmert:** Gohmert, who represents the 1st District, is convinced, all evidence to the contrary, that there are terrorist organizations -- somewhere, somehow -- concocting schemes to send their pregnant Black Widows to our American shores, spawning natural-born terrorists, and then using them and their US Citizenship Cards, decades on, to decimate the land we call home: "*[The children] could be raised and coddled as future terrorists [and] twenty, thirty years down the road, they can be sent in to help destroy our way of life.*" Perhaps he could become Secretary of State.
- **Rep. Steve Stockman:** Until he lost the Republican primary for United States Senate to incumbent John Cornyn (who during the campaign he repeatedly referred to as a "liberal,") Stockman was well-known as perhaps the nation's leading champion of what conservative Christians call "the pre-born." Among Stockman's many unique points of view, he recently opined that "*if babies had guns, they wouldn't be aborted.*" Perhaps Stockman could be the new nation's secretary of Health and Human Services.
- **Governor Rick Perry:** Despite hanging around the edges of the 2016 presidential pack, Perry has frequently spoken in support of letting Texas voters decide on whether the state should or should not secede. Perry's understanding of American history is . . . well, it's unique: "*The reason why we fought the American Revolution in the 16th century [sic] was to get away*

from that kind of onerous crown, if you will." Then too, Perry recently informed us that *"Juarez is reported to be the most dangerous place in America."* (Last time I looked, Juarez was in Mexico.) Perry might make an ideal President of the new nation of Texas.

- **Attorney General Greg Abbott:** The man who is seeking to replace Rick Perry as Governor, named shock-rocker Ted "The Motor City Mad Man" Nugent one of his campaign surrogates. Nugent is the man who publicly referred to President Obama as *"... a Chicago communist-raised, communist-educated, communist-nurtured subhuman mongrel."* Without question, Abbott should be named Texas' Ambassador to the United Nations.
- **Senator Ted Cruz:** Without question, Cruz should become the new Attorney General and be on the short list for the new country's Supreme Court. After all, he is the man who, speaking of the Obama administration, claimed, *"This is an administration that seems bound and determine to violate every single one of our Bill of Rights. I don't know that they have yet violated the Third Amendment, but I expect them to start quartering soldiers in peoples' homes soon."*

I wonder if all those who support breaking up the Union have any understanding of American history; of how more than 620,000 soldiers (one in five) died in that horrific conflict; that it cost more than \$7 billion (nearly \$90 billion in current dollars); that the vast majority of loss and suffering was sustained by those who seceded. This was no picnic; it was a long, terribly bloody monstrosity. And although the most obvious issue -- the enslavement of human beings -- was successfully addressed, the underlying one -- state's rights versus federal power -- has remained with us ever since.

From 1776 to 1956, America's *de facto* motto was *E pluribus unum*, namely "Out of many [comes] one." More and more, it seems like a growing segment of the American public seeks to turn that motto on its head and declare *E unum pluribus* ... namely "Out of one [comes] many."

The Scots, faced with the very real possibility of separating themselves from the United Kingdom, decided to remain unified -- despite more than three centuries of dissension and distrust. The Brits and the Scots are two different peoples with different histories, different economies and different languages. And yet, they are still one.

May we, who are supposed to be one people, one nation, learn from them.

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September 27, 2014

AWAKE! AWAKE!

(Note: This is an extremely busy couple of weeks for yours truly. For in addition to preparing lectures (the history of Islam, the short stories of Anton Chekov and John Barrymore's 1921 silent film "Sherlock Holmes") and pouring over more than a half-dozen medical research protocols, I have been writing Holiday Sermons. Having just completed the first series of services -- and being now in the throes of making preparations for Yom Kippur -- Anna urged me to make life a bit easier by converting one of my sermons into this week's essay. Seeing great wisdom in her suggestion, I hereby present -- in somewhat modified form -- the sermon I delivered this past Thursday -- the first day of Rosh Hashana. As with most of my sermons, it is pretty universal; one certainly does not have to be Jewish in order to get something out of it . . .)

How many of us have ever tried to figure out about how many hours a day -- or week -- or month -- we sit in front of a computer screen? Probably not that



many. And for good reason. I guess that most of us have a haunting feeling that were we to actually figure it out, the total would shock us right out of our Docksiders. For truth to tell, the number of hours is simply staggering. Computers -- and by extension -- iPods, smart phones, X-boxes and a host of other devices, have become as central

to our daily lives as eating, sleeping and *kvetching*. These electronic devices have taken over just about every facet of daily life:

- Want to know who was President immediately before Abraham Lincoln? Don't go to the library and look it up in the encyclopedia; you can either

go on-line and Google it or simply ask "Siri" -- this generation's favorite intelligent personal assistant.

- Want to pay a bill? Don't get out your checkbook and a pen; log on, go to whatever your banking institution's dot com and pay away to your heart's content.
- Can't sleep and want to know how the Dodgers did in last night's West Coast game that ended at 2:00 am Florida time? You don't have to wait until the day after tomorrow; simply go online, go to the [Dodger's website](#) and away you go.

As a result of all this ease of communication, computation and the like, we've lost the ability to find things out for ourselves, to do simple mathematical computations in our heads or, in many cases, to even communicate with people face-to-face. Along these lines, one of my pet peeves involves texting. Although I am not truly of the texting generation, I do engage in it somewhat laboriously every once in a while -- almost exclusively to my longtime "brains-behind-the-throne" assistant Art. Nonetheless, it never ceases to amaze me -- and here comes the pet peeve -- that people actually text while driving -- which is of course both incredibly dangerous and illegal in most states -- while standing in line . . . even while eating at a restaurant. I can't begin to tell you how many times I've witnessed kids carrying on animated text conversations with other kids sitting next to them at the same table! (And for reasons unknown, it generally seems to be at Starbucks.)

All this technological brilliance has added greatly to modern life . . . but at a cost.

To paraphrase what is likely the best-known, most oft-quoted expression from the Biblical book of Job:

יְהוָה נָתַן וַיְהוּדָה לָקַח יְהוָה שֵׁם יְהוָה מְבָרָךְ

Namely: *"The desktop hath given, the laptop hath taken away, blessed be the name of the cyber device forever and ever."*

Now I realize that there are still people who aren't part of the computer world -- at least as far as they are concerned. Take my mother as but one example. As modern and hip a woman as she is, she hasn't the slightest interest in having anything -- and I mean *anything* -- to do with computers. And it's not that she considers them to be the work of the devil or anything like that; she just believes that at her age -- she'll be 91 on her next birthday -- she doesn't feel up to learning a new language. (*That's Mom on the right at her last birthday party. And*

yes, she does look like a million dollars . . . after taxes! Great genes.) And indeed, she does have a point about not learning a new language; "computer" is a language all unto itself . . . just as texting is a language unto itself.

We are all familiar with parents, grandparents and great-grandparents who are firmly convinced their offspring are absolute geniuses because of what they can do with computers at age 5 . . . or 3 or even 2. Move over Albert Einstein! Indeed, I often tell Anna, "If only we had a 6-year old around the house, he or she could solve this glitch." But you know something? It's quite reminiscent of the immigrant experience vis-a-vis English. Among the millions of immigrants who came to America 100 years ago and more, a certain percentage of the adults never learned to speak English. Many learned to speak a less than fluent English -- often "*mit en eksent*." And then there was that small percentage that learned to speak perfectly fluent, virtually unaccented English. (Mom's father, our Grandpa Doc, was one of the latter; though born in Grodno; the way he spoke English, you would have thought he was from Glendale.) Adult immigrants thought their children were geniuses because they picked up English so very quickly . . . in school and on the street.



It's pretty much the same thing with computers. Among the older generations, many (like Mom) never learn to "speak" computer. Others learn it imperfectly, frequently "speaking" *mit en eksent*. Then there are those who conquer the task and get along with all the facility of those who were born into an age of computers.

I place myself somewhere in the middle of those who speak fluently but without knowledge of all the colloquialisms. And, I'm still picking up new bits of information, learning new techniques, even discovering new things about the keyboard. Not too long ago, I purchased a new keyboard for my desktop that has both English and Hebrew letters. It comes in very handy when using a Hebrew word processor. When I first hooked it up, I found myself paying far closer attention to its functions than I had with any previous keyboard I had used. In doing so, I discovered there were several buttons, functions and shortcuts I never realized existed. And over the past year or so, I have come to have several favorites.

These new favorites -- combined with basic functions I always knew about, serve as an excellent basis for a High Holiday sermon. I mean, consider some of the computer keyboard's most important functions and how they relate to the meaning of this awesome day.

- **Escape:** found at the top left of virtually every keyboard, it reminds us that unlike cyber programs, there is no escaping the program of life. As Jews, we are taught that one of the most precious gifts -- if not the supreme gift -- which G-d has bestowed on us -- is free will . . . the ability to make ultimate decisions as to how we will act. There is no escaping the fact the choice between doing good or supporting evil, of rolling up our sleeves and becoming involved in righting wrongs or merely sitting on the sidelines and complaining is in our hands. There is no escaping Rabbi Tarphon's famous dictum which states

לֹא עָלֶיךָ הַמְּלָאכָה לְגַמּוֹר, וְלֹא אַתָּה בֶּן חוֹרִין לְבַטֵּל מִמֶּנָּה

Namely, "It is not your responsibility to finish the work of perfecting the world, but neither are you free to desist it."

- **Undo/reverse arrow:** On the computer, there is no difficulty "taking something back" -- undoing that which has already been done -- even if you have saved it. In life, many, many things can never be undone -- like things we say about other people. We live in a time where airing dirty linen in public is as commonplace as drinking a glass of water. We all speak with such "knowledge" about people and events of which we have absolutely no first-hand knowledge. (One of my favorite satirists, Andy Borowitz, wrote a piece a couple of days ago which began: "*In a positive development for the U.S.-led campaign of air strikes in Syria, a new poll indicates strong, broad-based support for the mission among people who have yet to read a news article about Syria.*") This, my friends, is called rumor-mongering. It cannot be undone or reversed by the simple click of a button containing a backward arrow. The rabbis likened rumors and gossip to perfume escaping from a broken bottle; even if the breakage is accidental, there is no putting the fragrance back in. It is wafting about for anyone and everyone to breathe in. Since G-d did not provide us with an undo function, perhaps in the New Year we ought to renew our best effort to keep our mouths shut.
- **Delete:** Wouldn't it be grand if life had a delete button; a function which permitted us to simply wipe out a past event as if it had never occurred? Well, if you think about it, that's precisely what Rosh Hashana and Yom

- Kippur are . . . the Jewish delete button. Through seriously contemplating, analyzing and asking forgiveness for our past misdeeds -- against both G-d and our family, friends and neighbors, we can, in a sense, delete them . . . "wipe the slate clean" in order to begin anew. Of course, this is no mere performative wish; it is hard work. *If* we are to be forgiven-- to have our sins and trespasses deleted, we must seek out those we have wronged . . . which is both difficult and humbling -- and beg their forgiveness. Then, and only then, might we have these misdeeds deleted.
- **Pause/break:** unlike the undo or reverse function, we do have the ability to take a "pause" or "break -- of putting our normal, workaday concerns into hibernation and spending our time dealing with issues of greater importance; of giving ourselves the time to recognize and understand our smallness and contemplate those things which are truly larger than ourselves. Will we be more grateful for who we are and what we have in the coming year, or will we persist moaning over what we lack? One of the greatest lessons philosophy teaches us is that there is reality external to ourselves. Much of modern life stresses the centrality of the individual; of the prominent position of the individual ego. And yet, Judaism's long and noble existence has far more to do with the stress we place on the community than the power we give to the individual. Remember, few if any of our prayers are in the first-person singular "I." The overwhelming majority of them are in the first-person plural . . . "We." Again, a lesson from rabbinic literature, this time from the great Sage Hillel:

אם אין אני לי, מי לי. וכשאני לעצמי, מה אני. ואם לא עכשיו, אימתי

Namely: If I am not for myself, who shall be for me? And if I am only for myself, what kind of person am I? And if not now, when . . .?"

- F-7: When pressed, this key, which is up at the top of the keyboard, automatically opens up the spelling or grammatical correction program. Wouldn't it be wonderful if in life we could simply push a button and find out if what we did or said, what we were planning on doing, was correct? Alas, no such button exists. Life is a series of victories and defeats, of triumphs and tragedies. Hopefully the triumphs are great, the tragedies more or less minor and reparable. Some see virtually any and everything that happens -- both the good and the bad, the understandable and totally inexplicable -- as being G-d's will. And while it is undoubtedly true that G-d does have pre-knowledge of everything that's going to happen, it does not mean that he or she is responsible for everything we do. G-d is not and cannot be our F-7 button. If this were so, we would be no better than puppets on a string. So perhaps the F-7 is there to remind us the best

course of action -- the way to make the most of a life that does not have an automatic correct button -- is to never stop learning. As the sage Ben Zoma teaches:

אֵיזְהוּ חָכָם, הַלּוֹמֵד מִכָּל אָדָם

Namely: Who is to be considered wise? The one who can learn from anyone."

- **Control+F11:** This combination permits one to enter or exit a full-screen mode. In other words, this simple function allows us to see "the big picture." Oh that we could all pledge ourselves to try and grasp the big picture more frequently in the coming year. All too often we respond to a single event as if it is the sum of all reality. No wonder so many people have ulcers and have prescriptions for anti-depressants. If we all had a control+F11 function, we could take a step back, consider where an act, a deed -- even a misdeed -- fits into the bigger overall picture, and have a better understanding of how to proceed.

Within the past month, I discovered two functions on the upper right side of the keyboard that are so plainly spelled out, so completely obvious, that I was totally stunned that I had never seen them before. After using them a couple of times, I decided that they were the most important buttons of all. Namely:

- **Sleep and Wake Up:** I did not realize until just recently that I could put the computer into sleep mode without having to go down to the bottom left start button and then choose between "sleep" or "hibernate." Likewise, I did not realize that waking a sleeping computer back up was as simple as tapping the "wake up" button. Brilliant! They have quickly become my two favorite keyboard functions. And when it comes to the High Holidays, what could be more to the point than the command to WAKE UP!? For aren't we commanded to wake up to the new year? To wake up to a world of new possibilities and new challenges? To wake up and grasp new responsibilities for taking greater charge of our lives and working together, to help make the world a better, saner, more livable place for us and our families? Rosh Hashana is the wake-up function par excellent . . . if only we are aware of its existence. Our wake-up function is called the shofar; it serves precisely the same purpose as that button I just recently discovered.

And for those who heed its call, one of the great rewards is that second newly discovered button . . . the one which assures a good night's sleep.

For when all is said and done, what greater reward is there for a day spent wisely than a good night's sleep?

A Happy New Year to one and all . . .

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