It turns out, English is really hard.

If you’ve ever tried to explain to someone why writers write but fingers don’t fing and hammers don’t ham, you understand. Or the alarm goes off when it makes noise - and it goes OFF when you end the noise. And did you know spelling bees are only common in countries that speak english? Other languages actually have really predictable spelling systems so spelling bees would be sort of anticlimactic - once you know the rules of how those spelling system works, there’s no point to the bee.

In fact, the rules of English are incredibly complicated - and important. The difference between “let’s eat, grandma” and “let’s eat grandma” is just one tiny little comma but for Grandma, it’s a matter of life or death.

But English is also hard because it is the language of a very rich, complex and diverse society - a language that is shared by many people with many different cultures, with many faiths and many histories. This means that, for us English speaking Jews some of the words we use have meanings that we don’t mean - and that matters, especially on a day like today when we are filled with awe and power and are laying our souls bare before God.

Today, we speak of sin and of forgiveness. In Christianity, sin is often understood as a state of being into which all people are born as a result of the sin committed by Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. This is actually really different from the Jewish idea of “sin” - so much so, that using the English word can derail us from our own understanding… and today, we need to understand.

So let’s clarify. Jewish tradition teaches that each of us is, at our core, neutral. Our state of being is blank. We are not inherently good or bad and we all have the free will to make choices… sometimes we’ll do the right thing - and sometimes we won’t. The word “sin” in Hebrew is Chet - and it means “miss the mark” and in fact, is the same Hebrew word that we use in archery when we miss the target. It means we aimed for the bullseye, but we didn’t quite make it.

And when those failures occur, we ask for forgiveness. But forgiveness is, again, not what we immediately think of in English. Jewishly speaking, forgiveness is actually transactional. The most basic kind of forgiveness is called “Mechila” and it means two things have happened:

1. The person who did something wrong has done teshuvah.
2. The person who has been wronged has agreed to release any debt (financial, legal or emotional) that they were owed because of the wrong.

Sin and forgiveness are straightforward. I mess up, so I have to make it right. So, what is this TESHUVAH that happens in the middle?

Teshuvah is ...incredibly heavy. We translate it as repentance, doesn’t explain the real process. According to Maimonides, if you’ve done teshuvah, it means you did the hard work: you’ve examined yourself and your failure, you’ve admitted your wrong, you’ve made restitution, you’ve changed your behavior - and you’ve asked for forgiveness.
Here’s where Judaism really teaches us something: doing teshuvah does not guarantee that you will be granted forgiveness. Even more important, granting forgiveness that is unearned is not an act of kindness, it is callous.

It not only lets the wrong-doer off the hook, but it teaches them that they don’t have any consequences - that there are no lessons to be learned. Granting forgiveness to those who have not earned it breaks the system which relies on us learning from our mistakes.

This is the lesson of Yom Kippur.

The purpose is NOT forgiveness, it is teshuvah.

The whole process exists so that we can learn from our failures - and only then to apologize to others for the ways we’ve let them down.

But here’s where I get stuck. There is absolutely no guide for forgiving ourselves. To others, the mistakes we’ve made exist within a system of apology and restitution. But deep inside our own souls, each of those mistakes burrows painfully into the precious collection of failures that we secretly hoard for the moments when we’re methodically picking away at our slowly disintegrating sense of self-worth.

How many of us have really messed up this year - and as a result, caused great pain to someone else. Perhaps even, we’ve failed so significantly that there have been real consequences. We’ve lost friends or jobs or partners as a result of those failures and on every level, the paralysis of failure is the same. We know we need to do that learning work of teshuvah, but we’re frozen in the knowledge that this is as low as it gets - I am as low as it gets.

In our tradition, Rav Simcha Bunim of Pesischa teaches that every person should have two pockets. In one pocket should live a piece of paper that says אוני אפר ואני from the verse in Genesis where Abraham cries out to God, “I am but dust and ashes.” In the other pocket should live a piece of paper that quotes the Mishna: בושביי יברא העולם - “For my sake the entire world was created.”

Our tradition tells us something: we are both nothing and everything simultaneously.

This balance could also be understood as humility, and I offer it to you as our tradition’s best solution for handling our moments of total failure - when we think we are at our lowest. When we think of being humble, we often believe we should think less of ourselves - and certainly, there is no space there for the idea that you are everything. But we learn from Mussar, the study of Jewish ethics, that humility means “knowing your rightful space” - it is not in thinking less of ourselves, it is that precious balance - existing on the very fine line of remembering that you are everything - even when you know that you are nothing. Humility is holding onto them both.

This is exquisite - it is beautiful - and sort of inconceivable. At our worst moments of failure, how can we ever again believe that we are worthy - and how could we possibly be “everything?”
This call for balance, though, often appears in our tradition. We love that thin line between everything and nothing - that brief second between dark and light, between day and night. We will see that thin line this evening, when we make havdallah to signify the end of Yom Kippur. We will say the words “Hamavdil bein kodesh l’chol - we separate between the holy and the regular. But for a brief second, we will hold the holy - and the mundane - at the same time. And when we make havdallah, we will also hold a candle, we hold spices - and we hold wine. We **always** hold wine when we want to make a moment holy.

Why is wine given this honor? Think about what wine is for a moment. In order to make wine, you take the grape - the beautiful, flawless, untouched, perfectly spherical, uninjured grape, put it in a bucket and **literally destroy it**: you burst the skin, crush the fruit, stomp on it and squeeze every last bit of juice and you throw away of all the parts that you don’t want anymore.

And then, you let it go bad. Only after it becomes rotten and fermented can you have wine. So why is wine given the honor of making moments holy? Because we find the most holiness in the destruction and in the decay and in the unlikely result. We have obliterated the original grape - it is unrecognizable - but it **is that grape** - **ענב** (anav) in Hebrew, that can maybe teach us about the true meaning of humility - **ענווה** (anavah). Though spelled differently, these homonyms (words that sound the same) might be able to help us understand that balance - that moment of being EVERYTHING and NOTHING at the same time.

Teshuvah is asking for humility - for you to **be** the grape. To know that you’ve really messed up: to be destroyed and to believe that you are strong enough to learn from it and to emerge as something holy: to **become** wine.

Like the grape, our original, blank, neutral state of being is only so impressive. It is only after we have been squished and stomped on and we are unrecognizable that we can do that work of teshuvah and begin to find our own holiness. True humility comes from failure. Falling down, messing up, making mistakes and getting totally pulverized in the process - and then having a few moments of real, true, significant personal and emotional decay - only that process can teach us what it means to get up.

Again, we find that the English language doesn’t make this easy for us to understand. We have a culture full of platitudes and cliches - what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger, Kelly Clarkson! We have so many stories of failures that then became successes –Michael Jordan didn’t make the high school basketball team. Thomas Edison found 10,000 ways NOT to make a lightbulb. Dr. Elizabeth Blackwell, the first female physician in the US was rejected from 29 medical schools. Elvis failed music class.

We live in a world that **doesn’t value failure -- until, or unless, it leads to success**. But what about when we just fail – we fail a class, or we fail at a job - we fail in a relationship. We fail our parents and their expectations, fail our partners and our children. What do we do then?

It is that kind of failure, the failure that doesn’t really lead anywhere but a chance to know ourselves better, to understand our true fallibility that helps us find humility - and do teshuvah. I come from a generation that I believe fears **failure more than anything**, and we avoid those moments of defeat
and collapse at all cost. But maybe if we weren’t so afraid, we’d be better able to live in that balance, knowing that we really mess up and we are still valuable. In fact, our value increases **BECAUSE** we’ve messed up. Why? **Because that’s how we learn.**

The root of the word for failure in hebrew is kaf shin lamed - kashel [כ-ש-ל]. All you have to do is rearrange two of those letters and you get shin kaf lamed [כ-ש-ל] - sechel - wisdom. What you’ve learned. **And that’s the whole point.** To learn from the mistake.

Sechel is not book smarts or test taking aptitude or information recall - it is deep down, KNOW THYSELF, **who-am-I-and-who-do-I-want-to-be** WISDOM.

Teshuvah means you are kishkes deep in self-condemnation and shame and you are able to grow wise from your failure. When you let yourself understand exactly what brought you to that moment. When you discard the stories, the excuses, the justifications for why this it’s not your fault and when you get real with yourself. Like in winemaking, you’ve been stomped on and crushed, your insides are exposed - and now you have to filter out the juice and discard the skin that was supposed to protect you. When you are left with honesty and you know your own responsibility, **that is teshuvah.**

**What did you do wrong. How can you make it right. What will you do next time.**

Because for most of us, failure doesn’t lead to success, it leads to growth of character and to sechel - wisdom - about how to operate in the world with care and compassion for other people.

And for yourself.

Each of us stands here today at our most vulnerable - we are exposed and pleading before God for forgiveness in moments of our deepest insecurities.

I pray for each of us today that we will not be afraid of failure, and I wish for all of us that we learn the hard lesson that from failure comes not success, not vindication - but the **wisdom** of true teshuvah.

You have failed - and you are nothing. You have also taken responsibility and you have learned - and **that makes you everything.**

When (and if) you are granted forgiveness - by those you have wronged, by God, and **if** you can forgive yourself… **you will have earned it.**