

## **A Shortcut to Heaven**

Erev Rosh Hashanah 5779

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According to Jewish tradition, there are a few ways to ensure you get into to heaven. One is to live a pretty sacred life—you know, do good, don't do evil, perform a lot of mitzvot. Ok, living like that is its own reward, but let's face it, not everyone is up to the task. It takes major and unerring commitment.

Is there some easier way to hack your way into Heaven? You know, some way to cut into line?

Over the summer, for instance, I had to go to the DMV and take care of some business. I like the Beaverton office, the lines aren't too bad usually. When you go, you take a paper number from the dispenser and wait until your number is called. This one day, though, when I arrived, there were lots of people. I took my number—239—and looked up at the board. 150. Oy, it was going to be a wait. Then I looked down at the dispenser. Someone had taken a number, and then left it there. They must have had some sort of emergency. But there it was, number 173 on the counter looking back up at me. Should I use it or wait?

What would you have done? And what would have been the proper thing to do?

So are there ways to jump to the front of the heaven line?  
Thankfully, there are.

Our Sages believed that anyone who recited the Ashrei three times a day for their entire life—or at least from the time they turned thirteen and become responsible before God, would make it to the Upper Realms.

Perhaps the most challenging shortcut, though, is to make three shiduchim—three matches that result in marriage and enduring love. There’s a famous midrash that ever since creation, God’s been busy making matches. When an upper crust Roman matron learned this, she scoffed at the Jewish God. “Why I could marry a 100 people off in a day. Your God is not impressive.”

So she lined up a 100 of her slaves. In those days, marriage was a heterosexual thing, so she put 50 males on one line and 50 females in the opposite line. Then she dismissively said, “This one marries this, and that one marries that.”

She probably thought she was pretty clever until 5 am the next morning when there was banging and shouting outside her door. Apparently none of the slaves were happy with whom they had been paired, and they refused to do work until she had annulled all of their marriages. She learned you can’t just wave your hand and make a happy family.

I've always wanted to get my Heaven card that way though—what could be more heartening than knowing you've connected 3 couples and brought a little more love into the world? I think I have one match under my belt, but it's not so easy. I'm going to leave that job to God.

But it made me think—if it's so hard to help someone find their soulmate; and if three matches are all you need for the Heaven Hack—then what about someone who saves three marriages or three families? Shouldn't that earn you your ticket upstairs? I'm pretty much going to insist on that, because this one I am good on.

It's part of the hidden work of rabbis, and I definitely have more than three to my name. One of the ones I'm most proud of occurred when I was only a couple of years out of rabbinical school. This was in New York, where there are a lot more frum or highly religious Jews. That also means there are many families where the kids have gone in their own ways.

A congregant came from one of those situations. He was a well-regarded oncologist and a committed Conservative Jew—as were his parents. His brother, however, had gravitated to the religious right, and ended up becoming a Haredi or Ultra-Orthodox rabbi and a head of a local yeshivah. The problems between the brothers began when their father took sick and

couldn't give his diabetic wife and their mother her insulin shots. One time my congregant was with his mother in his brother's house. Her nurse was running late and she asked her son, the doctor, if he would administer her insulin shot, which he dutifully did.

His brother was furious with him. Why? To understand, you'd have to go to Exodus, chapter 21, verse 15 where it says:

וּמַכֵּה אָבִיו וְאִמּוֹ מוֹת יוּמָת

“A person who strikes their parents shall surely be put to death.”

According to Jewish law, this doesn't mean that if you slap your parent you get the death penalty. It refers only to a deliberate act that causes a flow of blood. And giving his mother her insulin shot was just such a deliberate act.

I confess that before this doctor came to me, I was unfamiliar with this legal ruling. But I researched it and came to understand why his well-intentioned action would be deeply disturbing to his ultra-orthodox brother. Each brother was honoring his mother in the most sacred way they knew how. And yet those ways completely contradicted one another.

I wrote a *teshuvah*, a Jewish legal opinion, that found a middle way between each brother's understanding. And I only used ultra-orthodox legal opinions, thinking that would make more of an impact of my congregant's brother. It did, and they were able to restore their relationship.

So I think I've been able to save more than three families over the years.

I can also think of those families where there was nothing that they could do to fix their problems, and no solution that I could find to help them open their hearts back to one another.

There are families who've asked for my involvement, but only on their own terms. In other words, they believe they are in the right and they want me to step in and convince the other member that they need to change. But that is rarely how families work. In so many cases, it is the family as an entity that needs to make adjustments, not single individuals.

In my own extended family, my brother-in-law's brother didn't speak to his father for 30 years. They lived under the same roof and he never said a word to his dad.

How painful.

Throughout this holiday, all of our Torah and Haftarah selections are about families of origin. Our desires for children, the heartache of children, second wives and half-sons being sent off into the desert, a son almost sacrificed on an altar. It's hardly accidental. To be human is to wrestle with the complex dynamics of family life, and these readings remind us we are not alone with our struggles.

These holidays force us back to our families. For those of us who are fortunate, we spend these times laughing and celebrating together over shared meals. For others, we are reminded of a familial estrangement that perhaps we can ignore much of the year. A number of us are experiencing Rosh Hashanah for the first time with out kids and coming to terms with what it means to have an empty nest. A handful of us have no family of our own.

For almost all of us, there is the longing for those whom death has taken from us.

As I'll sometimes remind families, you can be right, or you can have a loving family. It's hard to have both of those things. Too many of us would rather harden our hearts. Self-righteousness may feel delicious but it is definitely not a virtue.

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In the end, I used number 173 at the DMV. I deliberated on whether it was ethical or not to use the ticket someone else had left unused. I counted seven DMV employees at the windows. In my heart of hearts, I knew that it would have been an additional measure of piety to wait till number 239, but it also seemed that someone had left that ticket there as a gift. I took the shortcut.

When it comes to families, there probably aren't very many shortcuts. We have to work at it. We have to apologize. We have to let bygones be bygones. Not always easy.

Our Sages talked about different personality types. Slow to anger, slow to forgive. The wicked personality, they stated, was the person who was fast to anger but slow to forgive.

The most pious? Slow to anger and fast to forgive.

If there's a shortcut to the Heaven of togetherness, that's got to be the number.

For everyone else? *Teshuvah* should be a year long activity.