

# I AM A WORK IN PROGRESS

*by Rabbi Dovid Green*

I was describing a scene recently that had occurred in a crowded shul where I had gone to pray the afternoon service. A fellow walked in near the end with a look that was rather tenuous and uncertain. He got the siddur open to a page on the back of the book with his finger poised at a certain point. He looked around as if awaiting some cue. The service ended and people started to exit. Seeing that, he asked the fellow next to him if it's over and in a semi-panic state he began to recite haltingly the mourners kaddish from the transliteration at the back of the siddur. Some people gathered around him and afterward he told them that his mother had just died and he had come to say kaddish for her. I was relating the story partially in admiration of his courage to enter a strange environment and recite strange words in a foreign language aloud, and partially in awe of the powerful lure of an adult child to do something significant for a deceased parent.

My meaning was misunderstood and someone in the group suggested that maybe the people there considered him to be a hypocrite for only coming then to the synagogue. Nothing had been farther from the truth. Actually, that person had been immediately swallowed into a sea of concern and empathy.

It's a little like the bad joke about the boy who hadn't say a word for fifteen years and his parents thought him incapable of speech until one night at dinner when he threw his spoon down in disgust and declared, "Arrrrrrrgg! The soup is terrible!" His mother jumped with joy and exclaimed, "John, you spoke! But, how come you didn't say anything till now?" To which he blithely answers, "Till now the soup was good!"

The parent cares less why he didn't speak till now and focuses on the fact that now he speaks. Even if a person opens his mouth in prayer only in a time of pain and sorrow, that kaddish, that tearful sincere expression is certainly received with joy. Why a person didn't pray till now is less important to the Receiver of prayer. Till now the soup was pretty good! Life was smooth and creamy.

Furthermore, there is a crucial distinction between being a hypocrite and being inconsistent. If a person comes to lay a carpet in my living room and somewhere in the middle of the job I spot him going out to his truck I am not ready to condemn his work on the spot and report him to The Better Business Bureau. Even though the rug is full of bumps and not every corner is buckled down, still, if he goes out to his truck and eats his lunch, the lack of job completion is only an indicator that more work is yet to be done. Why should I panic and come to false conclusions? However, if he enters his

truck, revs the engine, heads home and sends me a bill, thereby declaring that he considers the job is complete, then I'll have Ralph Nader on the phone in the drop of a carpet nail.

When person says that he is the archetype of virtue and the model of perfection, as if the job is done, crowning personal errors or institutionalizing human foibles as ideals; these are the boldest invitations to be titled hypocrite.

I asked a great man what the definition of a positive self-esteem is and he answered simply; "Knowing your good points and your bad points!" When striving for goodness, inconsistencies will continue to appear. The moment a person improves in one area there are other areas to be updated. When one dish is being koshered the other dishes may not yet be koshered. If that's being a hypocrite then we could not afford to try to be perfect until we actually were!

There are two faults here. The first is to pretend to be perfect and the other not to at least try to become better. I have seen it displayed on the fancy buildings in Manhattan when under renovation, "Pardon our appearance, work in progress." When we stand honestly before our Father in heaven on the holy day of Yom Kippur it is important to neither feign perfection or to fall into despair.

The healthiest way to succeed may be to hang a sign on the wall of your heart simply declaring, "Pardon my appearance I am a work in progress!"

Good Shabbos! A Good Yom Tov!

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