

Jewish Defibrillation

By Rabbi David Wolpe

Human gestures are almost always ambiguous. A man with hands raised toward the sky could be praying, cheering or the victim of a hold up. Without the context and the intention, one cannot know.

So what are we doing when we beat our chests in the confessional of Yom Kippur? Is it self-punishment, an attempt through a long day to keep ourselves awake akin to slapping one's own face, or perhaps ritual theater?

To me it most resembles an attempt to jump start our hearts. Moving through the world each day we glide over the possibilities as well as the misdeeds that litter our lives. The modern world is so crowded, with so many stories competing for our attention, with the rapid succession of news, that callousness is a frequent response to the sadnesses of life. Yom Kippur is a chance to stop. We beat our hearts because they have grown sluggish from the fray. The *Al Chet* is a Jewish defibrillator. A few good, sharp knocks to the chest gets the heart sensitized anew.

On Yom Kippur we repent of what we have done, but is it a stretch to say we also repent for what we *have not felt*? The joys and pains in the world should touch us and move our hearts. So we strike them, in the hopes that they will beat more powerfully and passionately in the year ahead.