

SERMON FOR KOL NIDREI 5777

[Begin by singing: *Ashamnu, Bagadnu, Gazalnu, Dibarnu Dofi...*]

You all recognize this prayer, right? We chant it over and over - along with an extended list of “*Al Hets*” - during the course of the 25 hours of Yom Kippur. Beginning in just a little while, and continuing all day tomorrow, our services will be punctuated by the communal recitation of a litany of sins, accompanied by the beating of our breasts as a sign of contrition.

The Hebrew term for this practice is *vidui*, which is most often translated as “confession.” The word *vidui* comes from the Hebrew root *vav-dalet-hay* and is related to the noun *yad*, meaning “hand.” The root meaning of the verb is “to throw, hurl, or cast,” as in the phrase *yidui avanim*, “the throwing of stones.”

What has this got to do with confession? It turns out that the reflexive form of this verb, *hitvadah*, means to “throw away a sin, to confess.” That should sound familiar to us from the custom of *tashlich*, when we symbolically cast away our sins by throwing breadcrumbs into a river or stream. [See www.balashon.com, s.v., “*yad*,” by David Curwin, September 6, 2006]

Okay, one last etymological note: In the Bible, the verbal form of *vidui* means “to thank, praise or acknowledge.” In the Book of Deuteronomy, for example, the *vidui bikkurim* is the declaration of thanksgiving to God made by the farmer upon bringing the first fruits of the harvest to Jerusalem (Deuteronomy 26:1-11).

Hands, casting away, thanking and acknowledging, confessing one’s sins. *Vidui* carries all of these meanings and associations. And *vidui* plays an important role in Jewish practice. It is incorporated into daily *davenning* as part of the *Tahanun* prayers; it is recited at night as part of the bedtime Shema, on the day of one’s wedding, and for a final time, on one’s deathbed. But *vidui* has a special, starring role on Yom Kippur.

In tomorrow morning’s Torah reading from the Book of Leviticus, we’ll read that the *Kohen Gadol* – the High Priest – is to confess his sins and those of the people Israel onto a goat. Here is the text:

And Aaron shall lay both his hands upon the head of the living goat, *v’hitvadah alav* – and confess upon it - all the iniquities of the children of Israel, and all their transgressions, for all their sins; and he shall put them upon the head of the goat, and shall send it away by the hand of an appointed man into the wilderness. [Leviticus 16:21]

"V'hitvadah alav – and confess upon it"

We no longer send scapegoats into the wilderness, nor do we offer bulls and he-goats as sin offerings. We no longer rely on the High Priest to help expiate our sins by entering the Holy of Holies. (And, honestly, that's fine with me.) *But we still confess*, we still rely on verbally naming our misdeeds.

Maimonides, in his Laws of Repentance, gives us some guidance on how our *vidui* ought to be done: "How does one confess?" he asks, and immediately answers:

[He or she] says: 'Please God! I have intentionally sinned, I have sinned out of lust and emotion, and I have sinned unintentionally. I have done [such-and-such] and I regret it, and I am ashamed of my deeds, and I shall never return to such a deed.'

That is the essence of confession, and all who are frequent in confessing and take great value in this matter, indeed are praiseworthy. [*Mishneh Torah: Hilchot Teshuvah* Chapter 1, Law 2]

Notwithstanding that the *vidui* is always recited in the plural - *We* have sinned; *we* have gone astray – the task of *teshuvah*, of repentance and return, is very much an individual one. We do this self-scrutiny, this introspective work, in a very public context: right here, standing next to one another in shul. Chanting those long lists, we try to take an honest accounting of where each of us has personally fallen short.

And rather than making us feel self-satisfied about how many sins on the list we have *not* committed in a given year, the fact that the list is couched in the plural reminds that we are still held accountable for the wrongs done in our community, in our society. As Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel reminded us, in his masterful work on the prophets: "Few are guilty, but all are responsible."

Vidui is a serious business, to be sure. The imperative of naming our sins aloud, in all their specificity, is an important practice on this Day of Atonement. But there is another aspect to *vidui* that is reflected, not in the words themselves, but in the melodies we use to chant those words. Here's what I mean...

[Demonstrate with *Ashamnu* and *Al het...*]

Doesn't there seem to be a disconnect here? Why these jolly tunes for such a serious enterprise? By the way, the use of cheerful melodies for the *vidui* on Yom Kippur is pretty much universal; though the specific tunes may differ, Ashkenazim, Sephardim and Middle Eastern Jews all sing the *vidui* in major, upbeat modes.

Rabbi Debra Cantor

There's a good reason for this. Although the Torah bids us to afflict ourselves on Yom Kippur - and so we refrain from food, bathing and sexual relations - Yom Kippur is not a sad day. Yom Kippur is not Tisha B'Av, a day of communal mourning. On the contrary! Rabbi Abahu, in the Jerusalem Talmud, puts it this way:

The way of the world is that when one comes to be judged, one wears black clothes...., concerned about the outcome of his case. This is not the case concerning the People of Israel. The Books of Life and Death are before us, who will live and who will die. And yet, we wear white, we wrap ourselves in white garments...and we believe that the Blessed Holy One will act kindly towards us. [Talmud Yerushalmi, Rosh Hashanah 1:3]

The idea that Yom Kippur is a day of joy is echoed by 13th century Spanish rabbi, Rabbenu Yonah ben Abraham Gerondi, who wrote a famous treatise on teshuvah. He noted:

Although on Yom Kippur we fast, the law was established that we eat sumptuously beforehand. As we approach Yom Kippur, we eat a hearty meal, full of optimism, belief and joy. [Rabbenu Yonah, 13th c., *Sha'arei Teshuva*, Gate 4, Section 9]

“Optimism, belief and joy”

In the early 20th century, Rabbi Abraham Isaac HaKohen Kook, the first Chief Rabbi of Palestine, took this idea a step further. In reference to reciting the *vidui* on Yom Kippur, Rav Kook wrote:

A person should also be joyous concerning the *good* he or she has done. Therefore, just as there is great value to the repair of the soul by the confession of sins...there is also great value to the confession of *mitzvot*, positive deeds, in order to gladden the heart and strengthen the path of life in the way of God. [Rabbi Abraham Isaac HaKohen Kook, *Commentary to Mishnah*, Ma'aser Sheni 5:10]

I am very taken with this idea. Not getting rid of the traditional *vidui*, but adding a complementary list of the good things we've done. By naming our strengths and the good things we've done, we can try to build on them.

A few years ago, I attended a rabbinic conference where, as part of a leadership seminar, we filled out a questionnaire called StrengthsFinder 2.0. (Anyone can do this, by the way. Just Google it.) The company behind StrengthsFinder is Gallup and they claim to have invented “the science of strengths,” which has “helped millions of people discover what they do best.” I came home from my conference all excited about my new discovery.

Rabbi Debra Cantor

As many of you know, my sister Cindy runs a consulting firm called Leading Edge Coaching and Development (I have her cards in case anyone wants one!) After the conference, I couldn't wait to tell Cindy about StrengthsFinder 2.0. "Oh, of course," she said. "We've known about that for years. When we train leaders to give feedback, we make sure they aren't just pointing out weaknesses; they have to really identify employees' strengths and figure out how those strengths can be nurtured and developed."

It's the same for us on Yom Kippur. We need to ponder where we went wrong...and where we went right.

In 2012, Rabbi Binyamin Holtzman was inspired by Rav Kook to balance the traditional *vidui* with a list of positives. He called his list *HaVidui Hamashlim* – a complementary *vidui* – and instead of beginning "*Ashamnu, bagadnu, gazalnu* – We have been guilty; we have betrayed; we have stolen" it starts: "*Ahavnu, bachinu, gamalnu* – We have loved; we have cried; we have given back."

I was so inspired by Rabbi Holtzman's list that I decided not only to tell you about it, but to print up a copy for each one of us here. We'll chant it later this evening, after the standard *Ashamnu*.

The traditional gesture when reciting the *vidui*, is pounding one's chest, as, I suppose, a symbolic punishment. There is another way to do this, however. Remember on Rosh Hashanah morning, when I posed the question: *What would it take for our hearts to break open?*

Rather than beating ourselves up as we recite the *vidui* on Yom Kippur, we might instead, choose to knock gently upon our hearts, in an effort to open them up. And perhaps, when we treat *ourselves* with more tenderness and compassion, we will be moved to treat *others* that way as well.

Tonight, let us be disciples of Rav Kook, who taught that repentance and renewal – real *teshuvah* – cannot be accomplished out of "fear and melancholy." [See *Abraham Isaac Kook*; Rabbi Ben Zion Bokser, trans.; Paulist Press; p. 102 ("The Lights of Penitence/Orot HaTeshuvah)] but only out of a sense of joy and hope.

Tonight, let us begin the long day before us by looking honestly at ourselves, by admitting where we have fallen short, but also by nurturing our capacity to do good.

Tonight, together, let us answer God's call to become our best selves. *Amen*.