

Yom Kippur

The mechanics of Confession

As we enter the holiest day of the year, what are we to say to God? What prayers do we recite on Yom Kippur?

If you remember accurately, the most prominent prayer of Yom Kippur is “*viduy*” – the order of confession: “*ashamnu, bagadnu*” and “*al chet*.” It is frankly deeply puzzling that on this holy day, we spend hours reciting long inventories of our flaws and crimes. What function might the order of confession serve? How does it become the centerpiece of our Yom Kippur liturgy?

AN OUTWARD EXPRESSION

Viduy is viewed as one of the most central elements of the Teshuva process. In the words of the Rambam (Laws of Teshuva 2:2):

“What is Teshuva? The sinner abandons the sin, removing it from his consciousness, and resolving never to perform that sinful act again... He also regrets the past. One is obligated to confess, giving verbal expression to these ideas that one has felt internally.”

What is the function of Viduy in this context? It is quite straightforward. A commitment is not really a commitment until it has been stated outwardly (or followed through consistently with action). We think many thoughts. Many possibilities flit through our minds on a daily basis. However, a verbal pronouncement carries a certain weight, a sense of permanence and formality.

Or maybe we should approach this from the reverse direction. One who cannot make a particular statement outwardly should question seriously as to whether the internal mechanism is working as it should. How many times have we heard a lecture, an idea, but we could not repeat it to a friend? The likelihood is that we did not fully absorb the ideas. If a person repeatedly finds it impossible to propose marriage to his beloved because he gets “cold feet” and cannot get the words out, we wonder whether possibly the problem is not with his speech but rather with the relationship. Inability to express an idea indicates that there is a flaw, a disconnect between the idea and the person. Without external expression, a commitment to act is worthless.

Taking a thought and putting it into words is an expression of permanence and commitment. If Teshuva is to be a base for Teshuva - lifelong change - and not simply a fleeting whim, then the minimum requirement should be the expression of ones internal thoughts as an objective statement.

And maybe the corollary of this is the famous Halakha in the Rambam:

A person who engages in the act of confession while at the same time devoid of any intent to abandon the

sin in question is comparable to a person who enters the Mikve with an insect in his hand. (An insect generates ritual impurity.) The ritual immersion in the Mikve is absolutely ineffective unless one discards the insect...” (laws of Teshuva 2:3)

The notion of confession is synonymous with the understanding that sin is to be rejected, abandoned. If this is not the case, then one's confession is an act of external ritual (like entering the Mikve,) it is mere theatre, while there is no internalization. The outward act has no reflection in the mind or soul of the person.

ADMITTING THE SIN. THE FIRST STAGE OF TESHUVA.

We have presented Viduy as an act of clarification, whereby one's Teshuva is tested in a way. But there are other perspectives on this most central of rituals of Yom Kippur. Rav Hirsch writes:

The first step of Teshuva which is the most essential and at the same time the most difficult, is Viduy, the confession, or rather the admission to oneself that one has sinned. It is not God who needs an avowal or confession from us, for he knows us through and through; in fact better than we know ourselves. But, we ourselves are very much in need of honest and unreserved confession it is to our own selves that we must admit that we have done wrong, for without such a confession to ourselves, we can never become better. It is a difficult admission indeed for a man to make. There is within each and every one of us a small defender who is ready at all times to deny outright that we have done wrong at all, or at least to make excuses, to mitigate and cloak our transgressions, In this manner our defender veils from our eyes the true picture of ourselves as we really are, but, by so doing, also effectively blocks the path to our betterment. Therefore, the first, the most essential and indispensable part of the confession that we must make to ourselves is “Aval Anachnu Chatanu – Truly, we have sinned.”

In this passage Rav Hirsch perceives Viduy in a new light. Viduy is not about giving weight to a **prior** commitment to change. It is not about cementing the changes upon which one has already embarked. Rather, Viduy is about whether we are willing to face up to the sin in the first place. Viduy is not the FINAL stage of Teshuva; it is its FIRST move! Viduy is the prime act in facilitating Hakarat HaChet (recognition of sin), the admission and facing up to our acts of sin.

VIDUY AND GUILT.

So we have presented Viduy as:

1. Affirming the change that one has made.
2. Discovering the sin with which one is engaged.

Viduy on Yom Kippur is a rather grueling experience. Time after time we recite lengthy lists of sinful actions, traits or thoughts. The sin-formulations are left deliberately vague and generic so as to allow everyone to connect with the list. But it can get difficult. How many times can we think of the same acts in a single day? What should we be contemplating while we recite Viduy?

These two options facilitate two radically different emotions as regards Viduy. Is viduy a heart-wrenching act of soul-searching in which we penetrate our consciousness to admit our faults and sins to God, family, friends, community. In this view, Viduy is a deep penetrating overhaul of our lives. We try to pinpoint the causes of our sins.

But if Viduy is the affirmation of change, then Viduy becomes a celebration. It is not painful but joyous. If Viduy comes AFTER change has been enacted, then one is delighted to have overcome one's faults, to have succeeded in self-improvement. Viduy is an affirmation of the PROGRESS achieved during the year and not simply a depressing list of failures.

A MIDDLE WAY. VIDUY AS SELF-DISCOVERY

But let us move to a third dimension of the act of Viduy that essentially takes this all to a deeper level. The Rambam in his first chapter of his Hilchot Teshuva talks about confession in a different framework:

"Even those who bring sacrifices ... are not atoned by their sacrifice until they do Teshuva and confess verbally ... even a person who is put to death by Beit Din ... death is not an atonement without Teshuva and verbal confession." (1:1)

In the opening chapter of Hilchot Teshuva, the Rambam is discussing the notion of atonement (rather than repentance.) It is in this context that he suggests that verbal confession is a vital factor in guaranteeing atonement. Our question is – Why? If the individual has already performed the inner transformation of Teshuva itself, then what should there be in the act of confession so vital to the atonement process?

Let me quote from Rav Shag"ar z"l (Rav Shmuel Gershon Rosenberg, Rosh Yeshivat Siach):

"We must make a distinction between punishment and atonement. A Judge can convict and sentence a person, but he cannot pronounce guilt. Guilt is something that only the person can accept upon himself. Guilt means the willingness to see myself as guilty, condemned. This is something that nobody else can do for me. Guilt reaches into the intimate depths of a person... the Maharal sees Viduy as an admission of guilt; **pleading guilty**.

...When a person takes guilt upon himself, specifically the guilt of betrayal, (Ashamnu Bagadnu,) he reveals his deepest humanity. Who have I betrayed? - Parents, friends, people, God. The perpetrator of the betrayal has undermined the most basic connections of loyalty. Even

though he has engaged in an act of betrayal, it is only he who can perceive himself in that light ... through my lack of patience and gentleness to the "other", with my lack of attentiveness, my apathy etc. etc. I have acted treacherously.

The punishment can atone only for the person who will say: Yes! I deserve that!

By saying "Ashamnu – we are guilty," the person ... turns his own acts into a piece of condemning evidence. **But paradoxically, it is precisely at that moment that he may raise his actions to a higher dimension. It is at this point that the "Tikkun," the remedy, begins. In this way he finds himself, his real self.** How could I have done this? Where was I? How have I stooped so low? One has not merely performed a sin. One is found guilty with sin! The concept of sin is dependent not upon the act itself, but rather upon the sense of guilt associated with it.

... guilt engenders shame. But this feeling of shame is the beginning of my rebirth. Because now I recognize that I exist as a sinner, a betrayer, but I exist, and I can stand as such before God... In the world that is divorced, cut off from God, there is no such concept of sin, nor of guilt."

To begin to remedy an action, one has to understand its full ramifications. If we have been irresponsible in the past year; if we have failed to live up to our responsibilities to our parents, our spouse, our community, our nation - we cannot simply say, well, I "did" that. I cannot say: "It's true that I ignored them because I was busy." - Busy making a living, studying for finals, or doing a hundred other things. Modern society makes extensive demands on a person. But here is precisely the point. Is Viduy simply a technical affirmation? No! What does confession do? After all I do have many excuses and explanations to justify my lapses, my faults.

Rather, it is only with the feeling of acceptance of the full weight of the act that the implications - the hurt, the irresponsibility, the effects, the hardships and pain inflicted - the notion of guilt sink in. Suddenly I begin to realize that my "innocent" actions, are indeed harmful. And only once I accept the significance of my betrayal, I can begin to make amends. Why only now? - Because now I have taken responsibility for my actions. Because now I am ashamed! How could I have ignored my duties: How could I have shirked my basic parental responsibility just in the race to make money? How could I have closeted myself into my own personal agenda to the exclusion of my People? After Viduy I begin to take responsibility. Only now I can begin to atone for my sins.

Viduy turns an "act" into a "sin." I accept that my excuses are not enough; that I have committed a crime. And this is the starting point from which we might begin to rebuild, to repair, to grow.

Gemar Chatima Tova.

Rav Alex