

## 5772 Yom Kippur 2011

### Confessions

To many of us, confession probably conjures up an image of a small, dark booth in the back of a Catholic church where parishioners go, one by one, to tell an unseen priest all of the ways in which they have sinned and to be told how they can make penance. Sin brings to mind Adam and Eve, the snake and the apple.

Most modern Jews don't seem to love either of these words. Confession doesn't come up that often, and **sin** even less. We are more likely to say we have "transgressed", perhaps to differentiate between the image I just mentioned from the Garden of Eden and the Jewish concept of wrong-doing. Sinners, according to Christianity, may go to hell for eternity. Sinners, according to Judaism, may not get written in the Book of Life. There is no eternal hell in Judaism, just a time-limited purification process for the soul. Similar as these images may be in appearance, they are very, very different in substance. In a world where the Book of Life can be seen as pretty metaphysical metaphor, the ultimate fate of a Jew who sins is even more opaque.

Nevertheless, confession is a central aspect of Yom Kippur. A collection of Jewish wisdom related to the High Holy Days, edited by Israeli author S.Y. Agnon, offers this explanation: "The point of confession is to recognize that one has committed a sin, and before whom the sin was committed, and to be heartily ashamed of it, and to regret it." In connecting confession to Yom Kippur, it is interesting to note that the word "Kippur" stems from the Hebrew word "kaper", which means "to smooth over". Yom Kippur is the day of smoothing over. In that vein, failure to admit transgressions can be compared to a lumpy rug. You can't smooth out the rug until you remove the junk you have swept under the rug.

Within Judaism, the first notion of “removing the junk” comes from a passage concerning the scapegoat in Leviticus 16:21. Aaron, the high priest, is instructed to put his hands on the head of a live goat and confess over the goat all the iniquities of the children of Israel and all their transgressions, even all their sins. Then he was to send the goat off into the wilderness.

In Temple times, the idea of confession was expanded – the High Priest made a confession for himself,  
and then for the entire priesthood,  
and THEN for the entire people of Israel.

A bigger leap was made after the Temple was destroyed. No longer could one person to confess for the entire Jewish community. Each individual in the community had confess, and that confession became a new, although still formulaic, public ritual.

I spoke a bit about the Ashamnu, the alphabetical listing of sins, last night. Known as the ‘lesser’ confession because it’s shorter, Ashamnu lists general sins: we have betrayed, we have lied, we have spoken falsely.

Al cheit, the ‘great’ confession, is longer, more complicated, and more specific.

The two main aspects to Jewish confession, at least in a ritual sense, are repetition and community. As I mentioned earlier [last night], both the ashamnu and the Al Cheit are in the first person plural– WE have transgressed, WE have sinned. We confess as a community to sins that any of us as an individual may not have committed. We stand together in solidarity and in shame --

solidarity to support those who might not confess on their own, and shame because the public nature of the confession makes us all witness to each other’s admittance of guilt and to our shortcomings as a community.

As for repetition, Reuven Hammer writes that a prominent leader of the Conservative movement, Rabbi Simon Greenberg, “was once asked if he did not find it repetitious to recite the same list over and over again. His reply was that he did not, because invariably he would begin the recitation, find one sin that spoke to him, contemplate it, and somehow never get any further.”

So, if confession is that important to Jewish tradition, so integral to repentance, why do we hear about it only once a year?

Perhaps the point is to move from confessing and repenting to living a life that does not require confession or repentance. Everyday Judaism stresses adherence to a list of relatively universal middot, or values such as:

*emet* or truthfulness

*hachnasat orchim* or hospitality

*ometz lev* courage

*din v'rachamim* justice and mercy

and *samayach b'chelko* contentment with your lot.

The full list of virtues is longer, and their importance in Jewish tradition is rooted in Torah, Mishna and Gemorah. They are not always easy virtues to maintain: being slow to anger, for example, and being a good listener, but they remind us to act like beings made *btzelem elohim*, in the image of God.

We are directed to aspire to positive virtues, though we are not perfect and may slip up and transgress along the way.

Confessing our transgressions, our (dare I say it?) sins on Yom Kippur is to acknowledge our humanity, our imperfections. During the rest of the year, we focus on our potential.

The 12<sup>th</sup> century Spanish rabbi Maimonides wrote in his Laws of Repentance: “He who confesses in words and has not in his heart resolved to forsake his sin is like one who goes into the mikveh, the ritual bath, holding a cockroach. Unless he casts it away, his cleansing is useless.” The mikveh is a place of purification, and a cockroach is impure. If you immerse yourself in a mikveh holding a bug and leave still holding the bug, you have not achieved purification.

This Yom Kippur, let’s all make sure to take the time to throw out our cockroaches, to let go of those shortcomings to which we would rather not admit, to confess our guilt.

Confession is painful, but it also feels good, and for a good reason. Once we have confessed, once we have released our pent-up guilt, we can enter the new year smoothly, free from the bumpiness of stuff we have swept under the rug, free to concentrate on becoming more kind, honest, compassionate and virtuous beings in the image of God. Kein y’hi ratzon, may this be the Divine will.