

*Yom Kippur Evening Service 5774  
Temple B'nai Israel, Amarillo, TX*

Sin. Punishment. Reward. Judgment day. If I or another rabbi stood up to deliver a sermon on these religious topics every Friday or Saturday, you might think we had gotten a little lost. This language is often associated, especially these days, with preachers of other religions and their own unique theology. Certainly they are difficult topics to tackle. But here, as Yom Kippur begins, they come to the very center of our worship service. The words we have spoken and will continue to read and pray tomorrow are filled with these motifs. Each of us is asked to account for our actions and their effects, and to reflect on our relationships to others and with God.

Jewish liturgy and tradition has a strong precedent of confession as a part of prayer. Daily services include a series of readings and time in the Amidah called Tachanun, where one can offer a private prayer or confession. In the middle of the evening and morning Amidah during the High Holy Days, we have a lengthy period of silent meditation and reflection on the topic of sin. On Yom Kippur, the body of liturgy dedicated to a confession of sins is divided into two main parts: the Al Cheit (for the sin) and Ashamnu (the first word of a list of things we have done), familiar to most of us who have attended High Holy Day services before. On this holy and serious day, we have a different kavanah or intention than usual—we think about our own failures our sins in a more detailed and harder way than one would praying weekly at Shabbat or daily services.

The Al Chet section of the service is traditionally read ten times from sunset on Kol Nidre to sunset at the end of Yom Kippur. There are some variations and we proceed to confess our sins in great detail. We list the traditional list of sins, ones that can be found more universally in every monotheistic faith. The sin of gluttony, the sins associated with sexual immorality, committing bribery or other questionable acts to do with money, and all the various sins that come from listening to our yetzer ha-ra, our natural evil impulses.

This specific catalogue of sins is ethical and moral, based on the human world and our actions, not sins that violated ritual practice. Therefore, it is upon all of us to take on the process of teshuvah, or repentance. A better translation can be found using the Hebrew root la-shoov, which means “returning.” We have to return our actions to the right path, to the way we know to be true. My teacher Rabbi Michael Marmor of HUC gave us a great image for picturing the process of what teshuvah means. He teaches that most people see the process of repairing their ways and their actions as a line—always moving forward and never going back. There is only one direction. A more effective image may perhaps be to see the process of teshuvah at this season as a spiral. A spiral loops around and around, circling the same area at different points and distances.

I think there is a lot to be learned from this idea, this spiral of our lives and our personal actions. With the spiral, we can indeed “return.” We have the opportunity to engage in a continual process with clear points and marked times, rather than just forge ahead to the unknown. It’s more in tune with the human process. Most of us don’t really like change and we are set in our ways. It’s difficult to make real change, especially with the fear that we might fail or it might not work. Our patterns continue day after day, year after year, with only certain changes as we age or pass larger milestones. When we think of teshuvah as a spiral, we have the opportunity to make the small changes or take the little steps we need to be just a little bit better than the year before.

I’d like to guess that there may be some of us here tonight who were maybe a little more stubborn than they needed to be this year. Maybe we were too proud to ask for help when we needed it. Or maybe we were even a little bit selfish, missing opportunities to give when we had the chance. With the spiral of teshuvah coming around again to us this year, on Yom Kippur, which begins this evening, we have the opportunity to work on these parts of ourselves again. I believe it is something that we need to continue to do and that reveals, in the process, deeper levels of meaning.

This is exactly a way for each of us to relate to the text of Al Chet, the long list of wrongdoings and mistakes we read many times throughout Yom Kippur. Each year we read them, perhaps even with each repetition, we can find a way to see ourselves in its words. The thought process of Al Chet isn’t just about sin, but about change. It pushes us to never shirk from challenges but to constantly evaluate our behavior and in the yearly cycle, find new ways of understanding. For example, when we read about the sin of hard-heartedness, it may mean a different thing each time. Did I harden my heart against change? Because of fear? Out of love? When do I need more empathetic to others and their needs? In addition, many similar sins are listed out in great detail, even when they seem to fall into the same category. It covers each and every specific action, making sure we don’t miss an opportunity to reflect. The power of words is especially emphasized. Did I use my tongue to spread a rumor, or did I really gossip when I shouldn’t have, or maybe I confessed regret insincerely? Once we identify them, we can strive to be better.

In the books in front of you, the Gates of Repentance high holy days prayer book, we go through three themes in a creative way, exploring our personal failures: Failures of Truth, Failures of Justice, and Failures of Love. The pieces we read say loud and clear that in the last year, we have failed, personally, to uphold core principles of our faith. Perhaps some of us did some damage to ourselves, when we expected too much or were too critical of the capabilities of our minds and bodies, forgetting we are all created in the image of the Divine. Sometimes we may have hurt our friends—we lashed out in anger or shared in hurtful gossip- “I’shon horah”- or said something unkind in a stressful moment. Maybe some of us owe apologies to our children—when they were hurt

by our gentle suggestions, when we did not feel they were honoring their parents, or when we failed to recognize what they needed. All of these topics make up a core part of who we are as Jews and as human beings.

Just as the authors of the prayer book we are using and as previous generations have done, we have the opportunity with our Al Cheit prayers throughout the 25 hours of Yom Kippur: to add to the tradition. We can interpret the older statements and sins in a new way. We can make sure they make sense for us and for our society. While the list the Hebrew provides us is quite extensive, it is a product of a dramatically different time and place. I read it over and over and in my own process of reflection, created a list of a few more sins we encounter on an everyday basis. I want to add them now, and consider taking a moment to interpret them for yourself and to return to them again as you go through your own reflection and the cycle of teshuvah, turning over our deeds and actions for scrutiny and insight.

AL CHEIT SHE-CHATANU LEFANEICHA through how we live in the online world. We live in a fast-paced society where people share their lives pretty much any time and any way they like. The lines between private and public, between when we share and when we guard things for ourselves, are more blurred than ever before. It's not online social media like Facebook and Twitter that are the problem by themselves. It's how we use them, how they affect our actions and how we treat others. We take it for granted that we can make things public when we want and that we can share our news with the world. But what about when we read or look at them as well? When we see a picture or learn about an event on Facebook, do we follow up? Do we share with our friends, go that extra mile to show people we know we care? Al Cheit also includes sins committed unknowingly or with intention. Maybe in the new year, we can do a better job of being conscious of how we present ourselves to the outside world, and remembering that it is only up to us to create and support meaningful relationships.

AL CHEIT SHECHATANU LEFANEICHA by expecting too much. It's no sin to expect things of the world or of each other. We need to have standards to grow and to challenge ourselves. But let us consider the times when we expect too much. If we can't have it right away or create an instant solution, do we take it too much to heart? In our expectations of the world and each other, we have a need for instant and immediate gratification. Give yourself a break when you don't answer emails right away in the name of personal sanity. Consider the real difference between buying things you want and the things we truly need to enhance our lives. Maybe we can all try to focus more on the moment and being more forgiving, allowing some space to grow, some time to reflect, and seeing the importance of perspective.

AL CHEIT SHECHATANU LEFANEICHA by ignoring our responsibility to the environment. For decades, we have known about the impact of humans on

the environment. We have all heard of recycling, about cleaning our water sources, about global warming. Yet, the damage continues and we can sometimes feel powerless to stop it. We cannot nor should we be expected to fix this on our own. We can however take responsibility for our own actions and try to pitch in. Switching to recycling. Trying not to drive our cars as often. Working on a local effort to improve our community spaces and land. One small action, repeated over time, can make a significant difference.

AL CHEIT SHECHATANU LEFANEICHA when we tune out and shut down. When we are too busy to care or too inconvenienced by being engaged with the world around us, we risk sinning. We can hurt others, squash our own potential to help, and waste chances by staying silent. Even with built-in weekly opportunities like Shabbat or putting aside other time to nurture ourselves and our loved ones, we can lose those moments. In the Reform prayerbook, there is a prayer that cautions us against this very state of being, which may not be living at all:

“Disturb us, Adonai , ruffle us from our complacency; Make us dissatisfied. Dissatisfied with the peace of ignorance, the quietude which arises from a shunning of the horror, the defeat, the bitterness and the poverty, physical and spiritual, of humans.” We must use the faculties God gave us to never forget and to use our potential to the fullest- we have eyes to see injustice, ears to hear to hear the cries of others, hands to help our neighbor and the stranger. Let’s use them to engage in tikkun olam- repairing the world we live in, today and forever.

Deep down, we know to be true what the reading of Al Cheit says to us. We have difficult decisions to make all the time, and sometimes we do what is easier over what is right. We can make mistakes and act wrongly in many ways: knowingly and unknowingly, towards all the people we encounter in our lives or against ourselves, and it can be planned or spontaneous. We are all human, and though we are created in the image of God, that does not mean we are ever perfect. Each year, when the spiral of teshuvah comes around again, it is not expected that we have suddenly become perfect beings who always know what to do and what to say. It is however, expected that we can try to change, no matter how little or how slowly. Let us then pledge to do just that. We can use all that we have to be a little better, more conscientious, kinder, and more dedicated to living out our values.