

## CRACKING OPEN OUR HEARTS

Kol Nidre 2013

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Billy Crystal describes Yom Kippur like this: "...we don't eat, we don't turn on lights, and we confess our sins. What you have is a lot of hungry, guilty people sitting in the dark." Woody Allen gives us another memorable image in a scene from *Annie Hall* when Annie and Alvy's parents, the Halls and Singers, are meeting for the first time:

Mrs. Hall asks: "How do you plan to spend your holidays, Mrs Singer?"

Mrs. Singer answers: "We fast."

Mr. Hall questions: "Fast?"

Mr. Singer nods: "No food. You know, to atone for our sins."

Mrs. Hall asks: "What sins? I don't understand."

Mr. Singer says: "To tell you the truth, neither do we."

Do we understand? Do we understand why we beat on our chests and recite long lists of sins that most of us have never committed? And not just once, but many times, in two different versions!

A little history: In the Torah, the High Priest is charged with the responsibility of *Kaparah*, atonement of sin. He puts his hands on the head of a live goat and confesses over it all the wrongdoings, transgressions, and sins of the Israelites. The Hebrew words are *Avon*, *Pesha* and *Chatat*. Then he sends the goat carrying these sins into the wilderness to die. Hence the word: “scapegoat.” Seems it was pretty easy to let go of sins in those days.

After the Temple was destroyed and there were no more animal sacrifices or High Priests to offer them, the rabbis of the first century determined that verbal confession of sins was just as powerful. They ordained that we must confess as a group to be sure that all of the sins of the people were atoned for. These rabbis recognized that there is a power that comes from speaking something out loud, from naming it.

So, in addition to resolving never to do the wrong again, and making restitution, you have to name the sin, and you have to confess. Out loud. The words we use today are the ones used by that High Priest: *chatanu, avinu, pasha'nu* – “We have sinned, we have committed wrongdoing, we have transgressed.” Some of the early rabbis thought that just saying those three words would be enough.

But we're Jews, after all, and we like words. So the confessions, called in Hebrew *Vidui*, from the word meaning “to reveal,” became longer and more elaborate. Two of these lists of sins became the ones we know from our machzor. There's *Vidui Zuta* (literally, the short confession) which we call the *Ashamnu*. It's an alphabetical acrostic, a veritable aleph-bet of sin. *Ashamnu, Bagadnu, Gazalnu, Dibarnu Dofi...* The second (not surprisingly called the “Long Viddui”) is the one we know as the *Al Cheyt*, where every line begins: “For the sins we have sinned before You.” It is a double acrostic. Every two lines list two sins beginning with the same letter. The litany of sins is interrupted

periodically by the refrain, *V'al kulam* (“For all of these, O forgiving God, forgive us, pardon us, grant us atonement”). You all know the tune.

Reform prayer books historically have abbreviated the *Vidui* in order to shorten the service a bit and avoid duplication, but also perhaps because of an ambivalence about focusing on how sinful we are. Unlike some other religions, our tradition actually tells us that our souls are pure. For us, “sin” refers not to who we are but rather to the mistakes we make or the hurt we cause as we live in the world. Those three words the High Priest used, *Chatat*, *Avon*, *Pesha*, describe the three different ways we sin and cause damage: inadvertently, knowingly, or rebelliously.

How do you feel as we say the *vidui*? All those sins, from A to Z. Truth is, I’m not really that bad. I haven’t done all these things. Neither have you, I hope. Not every letter of the alphabet connects to something we have done personally, or this year. But still, we say them anyway.

When I say the *vidui*, I notice that the words give me pause. Did I betray a confidence? Was I cruel to someone? Gossip? (Certainly that

is one that needs work!) And have I paid enough attention to my 91-year-old mother, or really expressed the gratitude I feel to my older brother for being so present for her in Boston? Probably not.

The same feelings rush through me as we go through the *Al Cheyts*, the failures of truth, failures of love, and especially failures of justice. “For the sin we have sinned against You by keeping the poor in chains of poverty” – not intentionally, of course, but how often do I stop to look at how what I buy is part of what oppresses workers in third world countries? How many of those great bargains in clothing are so inexpensive because they are made in sweat shops? Or do I ever stop to reflect that the minerals in my cell phone contribute to the war leading to genocide in the Congo. Or now that I am thinking about it, I never did get around to contacting Governor Brown to sign the Trust Act even after our congregational board voted to endorse it. That’s the bill that would change the law that intended to deport undocumented immigrants with criminal backgrounds, but in fact has forced the deportation of a large number of undocumented who have no criminal record at all. It is

sitting on his desk now. An email or a phone call might actually make a difference.

How often do we simply not pay attention?

But once a year, on a list in our prayer book, here it is, right in front of us. This communal list is also a kind of personal checklist, a way for us to judge ourselves. Remember that the Hebrew word for prayer is *L'hitpalel*. It means “to judge yourself.”

And even though I haven't committed all those sins, there is something else powerful about saying this confession in the plural. I am part of a community – the Jewish community. When one Jew commits a sin, the entire community is diminished. And I am also part of a wider circle – the human community, so the sins of other people in the country or the larger world becomes my problem as well. This is most powerfully articulated in the famous words of Abraham Joshua Heschel: “Some are guilty, but all are responsible.” And because we are responsible for each other, perhaps there is something I could do in the future to prevent wrong from being perpetrated.

This *vidui* does get my attention. “*Al Chet sh ‘chatanu l’fanecha* - For the sin we have committed before you.” Yes, I am judging myself, but I also have the sense that there is another observer. For these sins were committed “*l’fanecha*” – against, before, or literally, in the face of God. I don’t believe in a God up in heaven judging, but I do believe that sin / bad choices / the lack of paying attention does in some powerful way alienate me from my true self, from my connection to divinity. I am moved by the quote attributed to John Muir: "Tug on anything at all and you'll find it connected to everything else in the universe." What I do does matter.

And so I chant the *vidui*. And I beat my chest. What am I doing with this beating? Is it self-flagellation? Is it some kind of magical thinking that if I punish myself, I’ll preempt any other punishment that might come my way? Maybe that’s what it was for some of our ancestors, but for me it is different. I am not beating my chest. I think of it as knocking on my heart, cracking it open and making it vulnerable.

Truth is, I'm not so sure I really want to open my heart. If my heart were truly open, would I still be able to function in the world? There is so much pain, even in our very privileged lives. How can I hold so many other people's pain when some days it is hard to even hold my own? The parents whose little boy was just diagnosed with a rare genetic disease that will kill him before he can become bar mitzvah, the middle-aged woman whose husband just left her for a younger woman, the eighty-year-old who is afraid to talk with his wife about how fearful he is that he will become dependent on her. My heart would really break if I let it, just from watching the video of the bodies of those little children who have been gassed to death in Syria. An open heart can be painful; it is not so different from a broken heart. This confession, this *vidui*, this revealing of myself, forces me to look at all those times when I chose to harden my heart to protect myself. This *vidui* breaks my heart.

My colleague Rabbi Jeff Salkin suggests another way of experiencing beating on the chest – as a sign of mourning. Yom Kippur



is a ritual encounter with death. We're like corpses on this day – we don't eat, we don't drink, we don't have sex, we don't bathe. Some of us wear a kittel, the white smock in which we will one day be buried. We say Yizkor, remembering those we loved who have died, and confronting the powerful truth that someday (if we are lucky) someone will be saying Yizkor as they remember us. Beating on our chests is a sign we are mourning all that has died within us, the shame we feel about the bad choices we have made.

Or, is this knocking on my heart even something more? Perhaps it is a form of spiritual CPR. When I sin, my heart, as it were, stops beating. This *vidui*, this pounding, brings me back to life. There is good in me. I need to revive it.

The Chassidic master, the Baal Shem Tov, taught: “In everything in the world there are holy sparks. Even within every deed, every transgression, there are holy sparks.” Think of what makes you feel the most shame. You lose your temper with your kids. Where's the holy spark in that? It's that you want things to be better right away, so you're

impatient. You fudge a little bit in business, because you want the playing field to be more even. You betray someone you love because you miss the connection you once had with your partner and you look for it in the arms of another person. You know these behaviors are wrong; you know they are hurtful. They don't reflect the person you want to be. Confession is the beginning of healing, of accepting what you have done, taking responsibility, apologizing, and doing your best to repair what you have broken.

So I beat on my heart – to it up, to allow myself to be vulnerable, to be honest with myself. I beat on my heart – to mourn for pain I have caused others and myself. I beat on my heart – to bring me back to life and joy and connection with other people. I beat on my heart – knowing that no sin is beyond forgiveness if I really do the work of *teshuvah*, of coming home to that holy spark – to the soul within me that is pure.

*Va'al kulam*, “For all these sins, forgive us, pardon us, grant us atonement.”

We'll knock on our hearts as we say those words tonight when we continue our service, and we'll say them again tomorrow. We'll use the words of the *vidui* from our prayer book and confess as a community.

But now, let's make it personal. Personal and anonymous. Please take the card on your seat, and take a few minutes to write one or two personal sins. Fold it and put it in the basket being passed now, or put it in the baskets as you exit. Some of these sins will be read aloud anonymously tomorrow afternoon.

I know this is not easy. It is not meant to be. It is meant to be the beginning of change, of returning to your holy spark, of becoming the best person you can be.

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[We gave people 1-3 minutes to write down their sins and to collect them. After a few minutes we concluded by singing one verse of *V'al kulam* – “For all these sins, forgive us, pardon us, grant us atonement.” And to see what we did on the day of Yom Kippur with the

*vidui* cards, click here:

[http://www.jewishjournal.com/religion/article/cracking\\_open\\_our\\_hearts](http://www.jewishjournal.com/religion/article/cracking_open_our_hearts) ]

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I am grateful to Rabbi Jeffrey K. Salkin and Rabbi Larry Kushner whose articles in *We Have Sinned: Sin and Confession in Judaism – Ashamnu and Al Chet*, by Rabbi Lawrence Hoffman, Jewish Lights Publication, inspired much of my thinking on this subject.