

## **Making It Personal**

Yom Kippur 2013

Family Service

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I'm not perfect. I sometimes make mistakes. I sometimes hurt people's feelings. I sometimes lose my temper. I often forget to thank people for nice things they do. But I am basically a good person. So I always feel a little strange when we come to the part of the Yom Kippur service called the *Vidui*. *Vidui* comes the Hebrew word that means "to reveal." The *vidui* is the part of the service where we reveal how many bad things we did.

There are actually two different versions: First is: ... *Ashamnu, Bagadnu, Gazalnu, Dibarnu Dofi* ("We have sinned, we have acted treacherously, we have robbed, we have spoken slander . . ."). It is a list of bad things from Alef to Tav... like an A,B,C of bad things. The second is the one we know as the *Al Cheyt* ("For the sins we have sinned before You" ... which is how every line begins). It is also an

A,B,C of wrongdoing, but this time there are two bad things for each letter.

Here's the problem. We say: "We have robbed." But I haven't robbed. We say: "For the sins we have committed against you by giving and taking bribes." But I haven't ever taken any bribes. Why am I confessing to things I haven't done? And why am I confessing in the plural...why am I saying "We" instead of just "I."?

To try to figure this out, I looked back into Jewish history...about 3000 years back. In those days there weren't any rabbis. Instead there were priests whose job was to take animals that Israelites brought to a holy place and to offer them as sacrifices. The animals were killed and burned and the priests and the Israelites who brought the animals would eat the meat. I guess it was a kind of spiritual barbeque! To sacrifice an animal was a big deal because the Israelites were farmers and shepherds. If you killed a goat you couldn't sell its milk anymore; if you killed a chicken you wouldn't get the eggs. So it was like making a very big donation to the Temple as a way of saying thank you to God.

On Yom Kippur in those days the priest's job was to ask God to forgive all the mistakes the Israelites had made during the year. He took two goats, killed one and put his hands on the head of the other and confessed out loud all the bad things people had done. Then he sent the goat off into the wilderness to die, carrying all the sins with it. That's where we get the word "Scapegoat"...blaming someone else for something that is going wrong with you.

About 1000 years later ( that would be 2000 years ago) the Israelites were kicked out of Jerusalem and we couldn't make these sacrifices any more. Rabbis took over from priests and instead of killing animals, all we had was words. The Rabbis decided that each Jew should make his or her own verbal confession of sins and that we should do it as part of a group. So they wrote the *vidui* that we use in our prayer book. They believed that saying something out loud made you pay attention. The Hebrew word for "Pay Attention" actually means: To place your heart... to place your heart on something.

What does it mean to pay attention or to “place your heart” on a sin? What is a sin? The Hebrew word “sin” actually means: to miss the mark. It doesn’t mean you are a bad person, only that you didn’t hit the target; that you made a mistake in the way you interacted with another person.

How does it make you feel to sing this list of sins, of mistakes, of missing the target. Do you pay attention? And why do you think we say: “For the sins we’ve committed before you, God...instead of “For the sins I have committed before you?” Why say things we haven’t done?

Ask for ideas: Responses:

We are part of the Jewish people

We are part of a larger community

Everybody has done some of these sins

Maybe we could have stopped other people from doing bad things so it is as though we did them ourselves.

These are all good answers. And maybe there's another reason as well. It is a kind of checklist.

I want to tell you a story. A few years ago there was a boy in our congregation who was basically a nice kid. I'll call him Shlomo, though that wasn't really his name. He had a lot of friends, both from school and from soccer. He was pretty popular; he got invited to everyone's bar mitzvah. Other kids liked to hang out with him. And though he was nice most of the time, there was one kid in his class that he really didn't like. She was new girl named Sarah. Sarah was a sort of awkward, not very pretty and a little bit clueless, maybe because she was new. He didn't have a particularly good reason not to like her; she never did anything bad to him. But right at the beginning of the year she had asked him if he wanted to go with her to the school "vice dance", (you know the ones where the girls ask the boys, vice versa!) and that really embarrassed him. Of course he said no. And because he didn't want anyone to think he liked her, he started to say some mean things about her. Like that she was fat, or stupid (neither was true) and that nobody

liked her. (That was more true.) And because he was a popular kid, other kids started to be a little mean to her as well. After a while nobody would have lunch with her and she looked pretty miserable most of the time she was at school. There was even a rumor going around that she was going to transfer to another school.

Yom Kippur was later that year than this one so more than a month of school had passed by the time Shlomo went to services with his parents. Turns out that Sara was there with her family; they had just joined the congregation. When the rabbi asked the congregation on Rosh Hashana to really think about from whom they needed to ask for forgiveness this year, he really couldn't think of anyone, except maybe his little brother. (He did get irritated with his brother some of the time, and sometimes yell at him.) But in general, he was pretty good with most people; nothing to be sorry for.

And then, in the Yom Kippur service, it was the time in the service for the *vidui*. He, like everyone else on the congregation, started to chant the words and knock on his chest. "*Ashamnu, Bagadnu,*

*Gazalnu*” ... he wasn’t really paying attention. But then he read: “For the sin we have committed against you by gossip” ... and he started to think about some of what he said about Sarah. Then he read: “For the sin we have committed against you by hating without cause” ...and he thought some more about why he didn’t like Sarah. Yes, she had embarrassed him, but all she was really doing was being friendly... and maybe being lonely. Was that really so terrible? And then he read: “For the sin we have committed against you by exploiting the weak” ... Sarah was kind of weak, he realized. And what good came to him by making fun of her? Did it make him seem cool in front of his other friends? Was he actually feeling that the only way to seem cool was to sort of bully this girl who wasn’t a bad person? Why was he acting this way? Did he want to continue to act like that? Would he feel guilty if she did end up leaving the school?

Shlomo got so caught up in his own thoughts that he stopped singing the rest of the *vidui*. But he kept beating on his chest. In some symbolic way, he was beating on his heart. He was trying to wake it up,

to open it, to help him pay attention to the kind of person he really wanted to be: open hearted, kind. And by the end of the *vidui* he made an important decision.

As soon as services were over he went over to her and said: “You know, I’ve been a bit of a jerk. Will you forgive me?” She smiled, and then he said: “Still need a date for that dance? So do I!”

None of this would have happened, he told me later, if the *vidui* was not in the prayer book. They made him think...and helped him open his heart. And by the way, Sara stayed at school and the two of them have become friends.

That’s what is powerful about confessing in the plural... thinking about sins that maybe we didn’t do... or maybe we did.

But this year I want to ask us to do something more...something even harder perhaps. And that is to think about sins that **you** did do this year, the mistakes that make you feel a little bad about yourself, mistakes that you are ashamed of. It is hard to do, because it means admitting that you are not perfect, that you miss the mark sometimes,



that you probably have hurt some other people. But confessing this “sin” is the beginning of paying attention to the truth that you want to change.

So I am going to pass out *Vidui* cards, and I want each of you, kids and grown ups, to write down one or two sins. No one else has to see them. No one will know who wrote which one. It can be just a word or a sentence... and then after a few minutes... during which I hope there will be no talking unless you want to talk about this with your parents... I will collect the cards and we will read some of them when we get to the *vidui* later in the service.

I know this is hard. It is supposed to be hard. It is even harder than reading a list of sins in the plural. But it is important to be personal too. It is a way to take the old, make it new, and together make it holy.

(After a few minutes, the cards were collected. Most everyone filled one out. We read some of them between Ashamnu the Al Cheyts. It was powerful to include words that were so personal to individuals who were present.) )

Let's conclude by singing together V'al kulam---For all these sins,  
forgiving God, forgive us, pardon us, wipe the slate clean.