



The Pardes Parsha Discussion by Rabbi Alex Israel

Yom Kippur: Why Confess?

We don't have communal meals on Yom Kippur, but we have plenty of opportunities to discuss the prayer service with our families, whether at the pre-fast meal or before and between prayer times.

We shall discuss the central prayer of Yom Kippur: *Viduy* – the confession. We say these in generic format: “Ashamnu, Bagadnu – We have acted with guilt; we have betrayed...” or in the “Al Het” text, which also presents an alphabetical roster of sins.

Let's discuss:

1. Why is confession so important on Yom Kippur?
2. What is one supposed to be thinking of during the confession?
3. The Rambam sees viduy/confession as a critical ingredient of the *Teshuva* (repentance) process. Is it effective to vocalize our wrongdoing? What does vocalizing do to the experience of sin?

Maimonides (Laws of Teshuva 2:2) talks about viduy/confession in the following manner:

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.**

For Maimonides, confession is the final stage, the END of the Teshuva/repentance process. But here is a very different perspective from the siddur of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch:

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... to 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."

We have many excuses and rationalizations of our behavior. When we make a pronouncement about our sin, we can begin to deal with it. That is why in the famous 12 steps of "Alcoholics Anonymous" two of the steps are that the person:

- Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
- Admitted to God, to ourselves and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.

For Rabbi Hirsch, confession is the START of a process of change and renewal.

Thinking about our Yom Kippur liturgy, however, our prayers are designed to be comprehensive and far-reaching. We "confess" sins from Aleph to Tav, from A to Z! But really, how many aspects of life can we really alter? How can we make progress on all things? Taking on too much leads to failure on all fronts!

And so, I humbly make the following suggestion. Alongside the standard liturgy, each person might choose to introspect and focus on **one single** behavior, one "sin" or regrettable habit upon about which we repeatedly fail. We should isolate this behavior in our own mind, and this single action should form the basis of a personal confession, thereby creating the platform for real long-lasting change on the basis of a genuine and strong-willed resolve to address and fix our broken behavior. In that way, we can leave Yom Kippur with the beginnings of change.

Wishing all our readers a Gmar Chatima Tova!