

Vidui (Confession) and Letting Go
Kol Nidrei 2020 -- Rabbi Lily Solochek

Shana tova, gmar chatimah tova!

During these past few months I have tried my hand at a few different new hobbies, one of which has been using an exercise app and bike. Recordings of very enthusiastic spin instructors guide participants through the ride, offering physical and psychological tips throughout. This was my first experience with an exercise app, and at first I found the unparalleled optimism and sheer peppiness of the instructors to be almost comical. They'd encourage us by saying, "if this is your first ride, if this is your 100th ride, I want to celebrate you just being here today. You showed up, you took the first step, and that's what matters."

Like most people, I appreciate positive encouragement, even if it's from a stranger who is speaking from a recording and has no idea that I'm going to hear her. And then life got busy and I stopped riding for a few weeks. Habits are hard to rebuild once you've broken a pattern, and so getting over the mental block to return to the bike was much harder than I expected. "Not today" syndrome quickly set in.

But once I got back to it, what do you know, that recording picks up again: You're here, you took the first step, you got yourself on the bike. And when you're a rabbi, everything that happens to you is possible inspiration for a sermon, so I got to thinking -- she's right, I am here. I wasn't for awhile, but I broke the pattern of not showing up for myself, and suddenly I'm here again. The recording doesn't know if I'm actually participating, so if I don't hold myself accountable, no one else is going to. Like any habit, I might start and stop and start and stop again, but each day is another chance to make that decision.

My guess is everyone listening has an example from your own life of a habit or practice you started, stopped, came back to, or struggled with. My guess is everyone here

has something they want to change but haven't been able to break that pattern. And the longer we don't do something, the harder it is to start again, the more we tell ourselves "not today", the more challenging tomorrow becomes. Soon the cycle we're caught up in is no longer about the practice itself, it's about our inability to get started. I can't start today because I didn't do it yesterday, and if I start now then I'm admitting yesterday-me didn't make my best choices. Maybe we start comparing ourselves to others or get stuck in the cycle of self-critique that we've lost track of the goal itself.

So our tradition starts Yom Kippur by reminding us that none of us is perfect. Before Kol Nidrei our liturgy says, "By the authority of the court on high, and by the authority of the court below, with divine consent and the consent of this congregation, we grant permission to pray with those who have transgressed." We start by reminding ourselves that we've all messed up, whether we know it or not. No one here tonight is perfect. Let that thought alleviate some of the pressure you feel right now.

The Kol Nidrei prayer itself, perhaps one of the most recognizable prayers, says, "All vows, renunciations, bans, oaths, formulas of obligation, pledges and promises that we vow or promise to ourselves and to God, from this Yom Kippur to the next, we hereby retract."

We begin by annulling the promises we will make in the coming year.

We begin by admitting that even though we are starting with a clean slate and making positive changes in our lives, we will most likely fail to fulfill all those promises we make to ourselves and God.

Let's briefly explore the more cynical read of this: if we say that none of these promises mean anything, then what's the point of committing to change? Kol Nidrei is an ancient prayer, and some of our 8th century sages, raised this exact question. They criticized the practice of saying Kol Nidrei, saying it would cause people not to take their vows seriously. To quote one sage, Amram Gaon, "Kol Nidre is a foolish custom and it is forbidden to say it." (*Seder Rav Amram Gaon, Ch 1 pg 47*)

Later in Jewish history, as Jews spread out across Christian Europe, the Kol Nidrei prayer was used against the Jewish People to claim they were untrustworthy and would not fulfill their business agreements. We have records of rabbis publically clarifying that Kol Nidrei only annulled promises to the self and God, not secular or civil transactions.

Kol Nidrei isn't about letting ourselves off the hook or a lack of accountability.

Kol Nidrei teaches us something important about being a person who makes mistakes. Imagine for a moment that tonight each of us was held accountable for every single mistake or unfulfilled promise. Most of us would probably be filled with such anxiety at that idea we couldn't make it past the first page in the *machzor*.

Kol Nidrei is not excusing us from our mistakes, but rather acknowledges our own limits and thus gives us the possibility to change and do better.

The Mishnah says, "One who says, '*I will sin, and then repent, I will sin again and then repent,*' will not receive an opportunity to repent. One who says '*I will sin, and Yom Kippur will atone,*' Yom Kippur will not atone." (Mishnah Yoma 8:9) Yom Kippur is not an escape hatch when we've messed up, nor a chance to simply sweep our mistakes under the rug. Yom Kippur only "works" if we have actually shown up ready to choose to be better. The Gemara expands on our Mishnah and says that a person who makes a habit of sinning begins to think that their sins are permitted. The more we repeat a bad habit the less we hold ourselves accountable -- perhaps most true with small missteps. We tell ourselves, well I messed up this time, I'll make it right next time; but next time rolls around and the time after and we've caught ourselves in this pattern because it just gets easier and easier.

Maimonides, a twelfth century rabbi, teaches when we do teshuvah we should cry out in supplication, donate to charity according to our means, and distance ourselves from the thing we did wrong. We should feel as though we are a new person entirely, unable to potentially repeat the offense (Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Teshuvah 2:4). Maimonides says these steps are meant to teach us submissiveness and humility. Yom Kippur is meant to

humble us, how could we hope to admit to our mistakes without first embracing humility? Before each confessional prayer we say “we are not so brazen or stiff-necked to say to You, God, that we are righteous and have not sinned, because we have indeed sinned.” Admitting our imperfections is the first step in the teshuvah process.

Rabbi Eliezer teaches that one should do teshuvah the day before their death. His students asked him, but none of us know when we will die? He replied, all the more so one should do teshuvah everyday (Shabbat 153a). But it’s hard to spend everyday listing out the things we have done wrong, and it’s even harder to start the practice of holding ourselves accountable when we’re not used to it. Yom Kippur works in two ways to compensate for this. First, Yom Kippur gives us a full 25 hours to focus and reflect and pray, without the distractions of the world around us to begin ingraining this habit. It serves as a crash course in introspection to propel us into the new year, and it’s always easier to start a new habit when it’s highly ritualized. Second, we will make mistakes, we will misstep. Yom Kippur is a day to reset, to account for the mistakes we’ve forgotten about or avoided facing.

One step in the teshuvah process is the *vidui*, the verbal confession of wrongs. Maimonides teaches that it is “essential that one’s confession shall be by spoken words, and all that which they concluded in their heart shall be formed in speech” (Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Teshuvah 2:2). We ritualize our confessions: we speak our misdeeds aloud, we gently beat our hearts, we bow our heads. We literally put our bodies into a posture of remorse. Yet the *vidui*, the confession, is not the goal. It is just a step along the road to *teshuvah*, returning. “The Torah commanded us to perform an action, in this case oral confession, and the intent of regret and teshuvah may be derived.” (*Yad Ha-Ketannah, Laws of Teshuvah, 1:2*). By posturing ourselves a certain way, by fasting, by praying and sacrificing our entire day, we teach ourselves regret and remorse; we begin with the physical to cause the emotional.

I want to dive deeper into *verbalizing* our vidui, our confession. We could just sit in introspective silence, we could sing a melody or read about repentance, but our tradition asks us to name aloud our misdeeds. And to push it further, we list not only our sins but those of the entire community: every confession on Yom Kippur is done in the plural, each of us confessing for something we may not have done. Rabbi Yosef Albo, writing in 15th century Spain, says that “one who does not know they have sinned will not seek teshuvah; we had to list it in order to know and do teshuvah.” Over the course of Yom Kippur we read the *vidui* multiple times, surely one of those times it sparks a memory of something we need to fix? If we only sat quietly or only read it once, perhaps those missteps would remain forgotten and we would not have the opportunity to for repair. By listing our mistakes aloud, one by one, we see where we need to work harder this year, we remember people we’ve hurt.

And returning to a previous idea, we don’t do this for the sake of confessing. The confession is a means to teshuvah, not an end itself.

If we solely focus on our mistakes or on our confession we actually haven’t moved forward. Imagine you’ve hurt someone. If you continually return to the idea that you’ve done something wrong and don’t fix it, but just replay it over and again in your mind, you haven’t offered healing to that other person. We’ve let ourselves stay at the center of the story and there cannot be repair. So we confess to lift the weight and allow ourselves to focus on the next step of teshuvah: repair and change.

Our rabbis remind us of the limits of simply confessing. “One who confesses in speech but does not have their heart’s consent is like one who immerses in a mikveh holding something impure.” (Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Teshuvah 2:3). It is not enough to *say* the words, we have to actually internalize them. The words have to lead us to changing our actions.

Our rabbis also caution us against becoming arrogant in our confessions: when striking our chests, we shouldn't strike ourselves too hard or confess too loudly. This is not about performative repentance. This is about resetting ourselves.

So what is the goal? How do we know when we've accomplished *teshuvah*? The answer isn't so simple, *teshuvah* itself isn't actually a destination. According to Jewish tradition, we've done "*teshuvah gemurah*, complete *teshuvah*" when we're faced with the same situation and make a different choice. (Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Teshuvah 2:1). What about the next time? And the next time? *Teshuvah* is something we must constantly strive for each time we're given the opportunity.

I want to offer one final idea of the role of confession in the process of *teshuvah* from the Ari, the Kabbalist Isaac Luria. "When a person sins, the internal Divine flow, retreats back up into a closed and hidden place. Thus, divine love cannot flow down into the heart. [...] And by means of these strikes you bring about a deeper striking to bring down the divine love which has retreated to a high and hidden place. You bring this love down to the heart where it is exposed." (*haAri, Shaar hakvanot, Derushei Hazarat HaAmidah*, 5)

When we sin, we cut ourselves off from God, from goodness, from Divinity. When we strike our hearts on Yom Kippur we bring that Divinity and love back to ourselves. We are not unlovable. We are not unchangeable. Though we might have temporarily cut ourselves off from goodness, we have the chance to literally be the agents of returning that goodness to ourselves. What if we saw our confession not as a self-flagellation, but as an opportunity to be vulnerable and open ourselves up to new possibilities?

We begin Yom Kippur by admitting our imperfections and our limits. Kol Nidrei reminds us that even as we spend the day making promises to do better that we will fall short, but even then we can always return. By verbalizing our mistakes we allow ourselves to take responsibility and then release ourselves from the weight we've been carrying. We commit to being better, we commit to doing better, and we allow ourselves

the space to know that when we make our next mistake there is always a path back. We focus on our guilt not to feel shame, but to inspire ourselves to change. We each know we can do better, and so in this new year let us each commit to do so.

Gmar chatimah tova.