

The ABC's of Confession

David Stern

I WANT TO BEGIN WITH A CONFESSION — THE story of how I first began to lose the perfect faith of my youth.

From the time that I was young I remember being very moved by High Holiday services. I grew up in an Orthodox home. As a teenager, I was very interested in theater, and the Yom Kippur prayers seemed to me especially theatrical. At a certain point, I even wrote a manifesto for what I called the Theater of Religion that was explicitly based on the Yom Kippur service. At the core of this performance was the Musaf service; at the center of Musaf was the Avodah, the story of the Temple scapegoat ritual; and at the heart of the Avodah and my Theater of Religion were the three points where the High Priest bows and prostrates himself and pronounces the Viddui, the Confession. The High Priest's Confession is the model for the viddui that everyone recites at the end of each Amidah throughout the entire Yom Kippur liturgy. These *vidduyim*, repeated over and over, silently and aloud, with their breast-beating and chanting of sins both public and private, were for me the true heart of this transfiguring theatrical moment.

After high school, I went to a yeshiva in Israel, where I eventually stayed for two years, through two cycles of High Holidays. The atmosphere of the yeshiva was intense, enveloping and all-consuming. And no time in the yeshiva was more atmospheric than Yom Kippur. The yeshiva was my Theater of Religion come alive. People really prayed. They prayed their hearts out, literally. The silent part of Musaf alone took at least an hour and a half, and you could hear people weeping beneath their *talleisim*; the walls shook while they beat their breasts. (I exaggerate only a little.)

The Viddui was the center of this concentrated intensity for me and my fellow yeshiva students. Each of the words for sinning — *ashamnu*, *bagadnu*,

gazalnu — took on a very specific transgressive reference. I used a little *mahzor* [High Holiday prayerbook] with a commentary on the Viddui that listed all the different nuances of sins that fell under each verbal category. *Ashamnu* was not simply “We have become guilty,” but was about committing acts of spiritual devastation (*shemamah*) not only against God but against our own selves. *Bagadnu* was about treason and back-stabbing and ingratitude. *Gazalnu* was not just about theft and bank-robbery but about taking anything to which we were not entitled, stealing people of their privacy, robbing people of their trust. And so on. The words of the prayer were not just synonyms, different ways of saying, We sinned.

Each verb was
its own kind of sin.

Each verb was its own kind of sin. Further, there was a logic behind the sequence. Spiritual self-devastation led to betrayal, and betrayal led to misappropriation and theft. Some of the other verbs of trans-

gressions were even more specific and graphic. And this was true not only of the *Ashamnu*, the shorter Viddui. With the *Al Heit*, the longer confession that follows which enumerates “the sins we committed with...,” the specificity became even more self-incriminating. All this intensity and literal breast-beating was incredibly cathartic; by the time you had finished the Viddui you felt as though you had really come clean.

And now comes the other confession, the story of how I lost this perfect, innocent religious faith. It happened with a small, almost trivial, realization. As a born academic, I often tend to overlook the obvious. Sometime after I left the yeshiva, one Yom Kippur, as I was beating my breast and repeating the Viddui, I realized that the *Ashamnu* was an alphabetic acrostic. Now, most people have probably always known this, but I hadn’t. It never even occurred to me. When I did see it, the recognition came as a crushing revelation, a terrible blow to my perfect religious faith..

It felt almost like a betrayal. For all the time I had been reciting this prayer I had been assuming not only that every word counted, but that every word was there to cover a different kind of transgression, to make us confess and acknowledge a different species of shortcoming or sin. And now I realized that this was not so — that the reason you had *bagadnu* after *ashamnu* was not because devastation led to betrayal or that these were even different types of

transgressions, but because you needed a word for sinning that began with a bet. And the same with *gimmel* for *gazalnu*, and so on. The most egregious of these acrostics was *vav*, *v’hirshanu*. Obviously, the author had not been able to find an honest verb for sinning which began with a *vav*, so he simply tacked on a *vav* to *hirshanu* (“And we have caused wickedness”). Besides, and let’s face it, *hirshanu* is not even a very clever word for sinning, like for example *niatsnu* or *tiavnu* which, at least as terms of recrimination, are far more enticing.

Of course, there is no necessary contradiction between a list like *Ashamnu* being an alphabetic acrostic and the possibility that each term in the list has its own special meaning. It’s possible for both to be the case. But the case of *v’hirshanu* seemed to belie that possibility in practice. Moreover, the liturgy seems to privilege the acrostic as an occasion for alphabetic virtuosity. In the *Al Heit* viddui, in its original form, there are not one but two sins for each letter of the alphabet — for *aleph*, *b’ones uberatzon* and *b’imuts halev* — a double acrostic, in other words, as if to show off the ingenuity of the confession’s author in being able to come up with two transgressions per letter. So even if it were not impossible to have both a meaningful viddui that was also an acrostic, I still felt that, in this instance, form was trumping sincerity, that alphabetic order was taking precedence over my confession of my sins.

Nor is the Viddui the only alphabetic acrostic in the Yom Kippur service. Piyutim or liturgical poems with an alphabetic structure abound in the various prayers throughout the day. But the ubiquity of the literary convention only exacerbates my confessional problem. It’s easy to acknowledge and appreciate the use of an alphabetic acrostic in a poem — what more clever or easier way to organize language and arrange it than to use an acrostic? But the Viddui is not a poem, at least not poetry in the ordinary sense. A confession is not supposed to be poetic artifice. The confession is about sincerity, not the clever use of words. Or is it?

The truth is that we might as well ask: Why have fixed wording for the Viddui in the first place? Why not have every individual confess his or her sins to themselves in their own words and thoughts as they feel necessary? In fact, this very question goes back to the Talmudic period. As I’ve noted, the origins of the Confession derive from the Bible and from the account we read in Leviticus 16 about the scapegoat ceremony where the High Priest confessed on behalf of all Israel. But already by the early Rabbinic period, the sources tell

us, it had become customary for every individual to say a viddui over his or her sins in every prayer on Yom Kippur as well as on the eve of Yom Kippur before the closing meal.

In fact, the original custom very likely was to say it once and one time only, right before the fast began, so as to begin the day free of the burden of unconfessed sin. Then, because the Rabbis feared that a person's mind might not be clear enough to confess after eating and drinking the last meal before the fast, they decreed that he or she should also confess before eating and drinking that meal. And then — undoubtedly because they realized that confessing was so much fun — they decreed that people should keep on confessing throughout the entirety of Yom Kippur through all five services which, since the confession is repeated twice in each service, once privately and once communally, add up to a total of ten confessions, making a neat equivalent to the ten commandments or to the ten trials with which Abraham was tested.

Early on, however, the Rabbis also disagreed as to whether a general confession was sufficient or whether one had to specify one's particular sins (Tos. Yoma 4:16), nor was there any agreed upon text for the confession. In a single page of the Talmud (B. Yoma 87b) one finds seven different versions of what one should say as a confession. Following the great Rabbinic principle that more is better, at least five of these seven versions have been incorporated into our present liturgy — and these do not even include the Ashamnu and the Al Heit! These last two compositions — the Ashamnu is known as the *viddui zuta*, the “little confession,” and the Al Heit as the *viddui rabbah*, the “great confession” — go back to the Geonic period in the 9th and 10th centuries, and became standard in the Middle Ages. So what we actually have in our present mahzor is an anthology of *vidduyim*, each of which was originally intended as a separate confession that alone was recited by its author and his disciples or followers. And of all these different texts, only the Ashamnu and Al Heit are alphabet acrostics.

The history of the development of this entire section of the Yom Kippur liturgy is in fact quite typical of the way the Jewish liturgy in general develops, from the outside in, as it were. First, the principle of a prayer — for an occasion and at a specific time — is established, but without agreement on such fundamentals as to whether there should even be a fixed text for the prayer. Somewhat later, one finds different versions of texts for the prayer as

composed by different sages. Finally, rather than deciding between these different versions and fixing upon a single authoritative text, all of the versions, or as many as possible, get incorporated into a single lengthy, fixed prayer-passage that avoids having to choose between the different versions.

What is striking about this particular case, however, is the fact that pride of place eventually goes to two versions — the Ashamnu and the Al Heit — that are not only the most specific in enumerating transgressions but also the most fixed and the most artificial, by virtue of being alphabetical acrostics. How can external literary form so dictate and even trump sincerity and meaning?

The answer to this question is what I call the paradox of the Viddui. Over time, I have learned to love this paradox, and I have done this by living with a poet — my wife Kathryn — who has taught me to appreciate that sincerity and feeling are not necessarily, or always, divorced from ornament or aesthetic form. In fact, it is sometimes exactly the opposite — the most exacting and rigorous formal requirements elicit the most intense and concentrated expressions of feeling.

Jewish tradition requires a verbal confession — a confession in words — as part of the process of repentance. It is not enough simply to feel repentant or contrite, or to think thoughts of repentance. As Maimonides says, verbal confession is the positive commandment. But you can't confess in words without language, and there is no language without some kind of form, even if it's as rudimentary as a grammar or an alphabet. In this sense, the Ashamnu is language in its most pared-down, astringent form, the naked alphabet, as it were, the barest, most elemental expression of language. It is a list of sins whittled down to single words, and those single words go from aleph to tav, relentlessly and inexorably. You know what has to come next, because you know the alphabet and what comes next in the alphabet. Everybody does. The effect is to make the force of confession inevitable, inexorable, relentless.

Its alphabetical structure also makes the Viddui more than just a random confession of some sins — the Viddui is alphabetical because it is about the confession of the totality of one's sins, from aleph to tav, from alpha to omega. Not a selection of sins, or of certain letters, but all of them. And the fact that it is alphabetical makes it impossible either to hide any sins or forget them or inadvertently skip one sin or another, just as in reciting the alphabet you cannot leave out a letter.

And because the Viddui is in words, in language, it is a speech addressed to an audience. It is not just a statement of inward feeling, or a device of internal motivation, or an exercise in working up to repentance. It is in language because it needs to come out of your mouth in order to reach someone else's ears.

To be sure, an alphabetical ditty is not one's ordinary idea of a speech or an address to another person, but in that little *mahzor* of mine from my yeshiva days with a commentary on the Viddui there is a remarkable passage — quoted from a book called *Sefer Etz haDaat Tov, The Book of the Tree of Knowledge of the Good* — that explains why the Viddui is in an alphabetic acrostic. The explanation is presented in the form of a parable about a king who had a terrible argument with his wife and banished her to a distant land. As the days of her exile in that land lengthened, the poor consort grew increasingly unhappy. What did she do? She returned to the king's palace, took up the harp which the court musician had played on their wedding day, and she played it while weeping and lamenting, ever so plaintively, Thus and thus I rebelled against you, *thus* and *thus* I sinned against you. Finally, the king's mercies were aroused, and he remembered the joy of his youthful love in the days of their marriage, and he took his consort back.

The meaning of this parable is clear: the king is God, the consort is Israel, the place of the consort's exile is the place of our exile, and the harp is the letters of the Hebrew alphabet with which God composed the Torah that He gave to Israel on the day that He took Israel as His bride on Mt. Sinai. Those letters now compose the Viddui that Israel makes to her estranged God. But as the parable makes clear, that Viddui is not a mere confession of sins. It is Israel's love song to God, an artful, strategically conceived apology intended to win Him back, a siren's song of apology whose real goal is to bring the redemption — as the *Sefer Etz haDaat Tov* concludes, *bim'heirah b'yameinu, amen, kein yehi ratzon* — speedily in our days, amen, so may it be His will.

David Stern is a professor of Classical Hebrew Literature at the University of Pennsylvania. He has written widely on midrash and medieval and modern Jewish literature, and currently studies the history of the Jewish book as a material artifact. He confesses to nothing.