

Confessions

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MY FRIENDS, I HAVE A CONFESSION TO MAKE.

Several, in fact. You know what I mean. Repeated lists of alphabetized synonyms for sin, transgression, and betrayal abound in the seemingly endless sequence of confessions, or *viduyim*, of the Yom Kippur service.

The imperative to confess — *l'hitvadot* — is central to the Yom Kippur ritual in both its biblical and contemporary observances. In the Torah portion and the Avodah service, we read about the triple confession of the High Priest in the Temple: on his own behalf, on behalf of his household, and on behalf of all of Israel. Our own liturgy — which comes in place of sacrificial worship in the Temple — has us reciting several versions of a *vidui*/confession, over and over again. Indeed, our tradition sees *vidui* as central to the process of *teshuvah*/repentance. According to some sources, it is the only part of *teshuvah* that is specifically mandated from the Torah.

At first blush (a good phrase to use in contemplating the shameful record of one's past deeds), it strikes us as obvious why this is so. After all, you cannot regret, repent, and resolve never to do again — something that you don't acknowledge as wrongful in the first place. And yet, why specifically the requirement to confess it? That is, why is it necessary to put it into words, to give it language, to say it not only in the depth of one's heart, but aloud? For the *vidui* must be spoken aloud. The Rambam/Maimonides notes:

Repentance involves forsaking sins and removing such thoughts from one's way of thinking and resolving firmly never to do it again...One should also be remorseful over what one has done...One also has to testify to God that one will never return to that sin...*All of these three declarations have to be made out loud.*

One must confess with one's lips and state verbally those things (regret and repentance) which one has resolved in one's heart.

[HILKHOT TESHUVAH 2:2]

And his is the prevailing opinion — that regret, repentance, and resolve for the future are not sufficient without a declaration out loud.

Why is that? Before we rush to respond in myriad ways with the insights of psychology, linguistics, literary theory, or other fields, we should think about the particular — and one might say peculiar — way in which we satisfy that requirement liturgically. We mumble, or chant, or give sprightly melody, to a list of misdoings that emerge not from our heart, but from the hearts, minds, and pens of those who preceded us, who composed, argued over, elaborated, and embellished the liturgical selections of our *machzorim*/High Holiday prayer-books. Few of us, I venture to say, can distinguish among the types of wrongdoing enumerated — sins, iniquities, and so on — or understand each and every term used, or would personally plead guilty to every term we do understand.

To understand our collective Yom Kippur Vidui, and the relationship between ritual confession and the individual process of repentance and atonement, let's begin with the very concept of confession. From the Latin *con* (with others) and *fess* (speaking), confession consists of making a statement that acknowledges something a person has done that the person would have preferred to keep secret from others. In its most general usage, it means acknowledging something that is embarrassing or reveals weakness. More precisely, it is an admission of wrong-doing. A legal confession means acknowledging having done something illegal, something which carries legal consequences. Religious confession involves acknowledging doing something morally wrong, something sinful and forbidden.

Judaism, of course, is not the only religion to have a tradition of confession. Buddhists confess to spiritual mentor. In Alcoholics Anonymous, confession is the fifth of twelve steps, and must be done publicly. In Islam, as in Judaism, one confesses directly to God. In Christianity, confession is necessary for forgiveness, and the confession is made through an appropriate mediator. Roman Catholics, for example, confess sin to a priest, who is authorized to absolve them in the name of God.

The Western world's understanding of confession dates back to St. Augustine, who — in the fourth/fifth century — wrote a moral autobiography.

In his autobiography, Augustine looked back on a sinful life without God from the perspective of his later self, having had a conversion experience and become devoutly Christian. His autobiography is a vidui in the sense that, in its pages, he admits his sins. It is also a vidui in the sense of publicly declaring God's abundant presence in the world. The autobiography is addressed to God. But the book is also intended for an audience beyond God. In other words, Augustine intends for other people to read it. Why? Because Augustine sees his own journey as an example that might inspire others to repent.

In spite of the consonance between Augustine's concept confession and our own Vidui, our tradition is not so keen on public confession. By that I mean, Judaism does not encourage one to give public audience to an elaboration of one's actual misdeeds, but — instead — for the most part, insists that personal vidui must be for God alone. You might think that a public confession would be a good thing — a solid reinforcement of one's penitential intentions or, as Augustine hoped, a source of inspiration. But Judaism countenances only the recitation of the vidui formula in public, not a narration of one's actual misdeeds. Rav Kahana, in Brachot, calls someone who recites his personal sins in public a *hatzpan* — an impudent person.

I believe our tradition is prescient in seeing the danger of public individual confession. I can best illustrate this through the case of the 18th century French philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau. Rousseau wrote an influential autobiographical book called, like Augustine's, *Confessions*. In it, he, too, recounts his moral failings. In one often cited example, Rousseau recollects how, as a young man, he stole a ribbon. When caught red-handed, he lied, shifting the blame to a servant, Marion. She was fired. In a famous essay (at least among literature professors), a deconstructionist critic points out that Rousseau's confession is a nothing more than a mimicry of a confession — that is, a mimicry of a true acknowledgement of wrongdoing. Rousseau's "confession" is self-serving. Writing out and publishing his regretfulness makes him look good to his reading public — sensitive, sincere. But the servant's life was ruined. The admission comes decades late, when it cannot harm Rousseau and cannot help Marion. Rousseau's belated confession is not a step along the path toward atonement, but makes atonement irrelevant.

This criticism of Rousseau's confession sees it less as the product of anguished soul-searching, and more as public posturing. Let's call it faux confession, something we often see in the public arena today: A public figure,

caught doing something wrong, appears on television full of contrition. In earlier times, his career would have been ruined. Now, he simply needs to publicly confess: I let my family down. I was weak. I was wrong. I let my constituents down. There is a public performance of humiliation and contrition, then it's over. Business as usual, politics as usual. Not only is there no real repentance, but such faux confessions have a pernicious effect. They normalize certain behaviors, make them less shocking, less shameful, less dishonorable.

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But what of our own synagogue practice on Yom Kippur? We confess publicly, but not to a revealing set of past deeds pulled from the depth of memory and soul. We confess identically and in unison to categories of wrong, not to specific instances. Our Yom Kippur confessions are without narrative — they do not tell the story of our failings. What is the relationship between this impersonal catalog in our machzor, and the introspection of true teshuvah?

A vidui is not precisely or solely a confession. Its etymology points in a different direction. The Hebrew word vidui is closely related to *l'hodot* — to acknowledge, to praise, to thank. In addition to the confessional viduyim — such as the ones recited on Yom Kippur and the one recited before death — there is the biblically mandated *vidui bikurim*, the acknowledgement of God's bounty as one brings the sacrificial offerings of first fruit (as per Deut. 26:11). This last one has nothing to do with the confession of sins. But, like the confessional vidui, it establishes us as independent beings, in this case capable of cultivating our fields and orchards, and of appreciating divine gifts. So our rubric of vidui is broader than the Western concept embedded in the word confession.

Our Yom Kippur Vidui developed out of the pages of the Gemara and onwards. Our sages composed a variety of viduyim, confessional formulae, statements, and poems, which all found their way into the Yom Kippur liturgy, lengthened, refined, elaborated. Over time, different interpretations developed for the sinful listings of the liturgical viduyim, for the sequencing of items and the relationship among them. Yet I suspect that most of us do not know what

every one of them means, even when we read them in translation. And most of us believe ourselves utterly innocent of some of them. I think our ancestors may have felt similarly. In the 16th century, Rav Moshe Isserles — the Rama — *paskaned*/ruled: You can recite the Vidui in its entirety even if you are certain you've never committed a particular sin.

This loose relationship between actions committed and actions confessed ritually and aloud prevents our public recitation from becoming a narcissistic or self-glorifying performance. Instead, it keeps us focused tightly on our relationship with the Divine (to whom we confess) and with community (with whom we confess), and on our status as created and yet independent beings.

The many images in the machzor for our relationship to our Maker — our *yotzer* — include that of a potter (*yotzer*) working clay, a stonecutter working stone, a blacksmith forging iron, a glassblower blowing glass, and so forth. These images reinforce our powerlessness before the relative power of the Divine. But — paradoxically — the images also suggest our freedom from Divine control. Our liturgy does not include the metaphor of an author and the characters he or she creates. But it could — and the image would be instructive.

In an interview soon after he emerged from sequester, Salman Rushdie speaks about what triggered the fatwa that propelled him into years of hiding. His 1988 novel, *The Satanic Verses*, was intended as an exploration of the conditions of the migrant; the incursion of East into West and West into East, the symbiotic relationship of the past and the present. Instead, the book was seen as an attack on Islam.

Rushdie observed, "...when a book leaves its author's desk, it changes." It becomes "a book that can be read, that no longer belongs to its maker."

The implication of that shift in belonging is explored in the recent film, *Ruby Sparks*. The film follows the relationship between a young writer and the girlfriend who materialized, literally, out of his imagination, out of his word processor. This is not a new theme; it reworks the Greek myth of Pygmalion, modernized by George Bernard Shaw in the play of that name, and then adapted into the musical *My Fair Lady*. The artist creates a most perfect beloved, who is ideal because she contains everything he desires, including her devotion to him, the creator. But if this creation that springs from his imagination is to bring him any satisfaction, it has to be more than a simple puppet that he can manipulate at will, cutting out

undesirable traits, curbing conflicting wants or interests. If the artist retains full control over his creation, she will continue to satisfy him fully in every respect but the most important one. She will not be another person who loves and supports him as only a soulmate can; she will simply be an extension of himself, so that loving and being loved by her is simply narcissism, self-love. The creation needs to become a real person, launched into the world with all that the artist has put into her, of course, but transformed into her own entity. She needs, in other words, to be able to tell her own story — born of her own desires, intellect, and imagination — and not simply his. And here, if we look at the record of myth and literature, is where things fall apart.

Any myth about humans creating sentient beings always ends up the same way. Once the imagined being is transformed into something real and independent, its desires no longer coincide with the desires of its creator. The Jewish legend of the Golem is a variation on this theme. In the Golem story, the Maharal of Prague — the 16th century Rabbi Loewe — constructs a being to meet the needs of the Jews of Prague — at that time, defense. The Maharal creates him out of earth and clay, and brings him to life by writing *emet*/truth on his forehead and by chanting — if we are to credit kabbalistic sources on animating an inanimate humanoid — sacred chants. But the breath of life is a funny thing — unpredictable and uncontrollable. Along with the breath of life comes also desire, and the Golem falls in love with a woman. The Maharal wants the Golem to wish only to fulfill his mission, but the Golem wants what he wants. The longing of the Golem is a symbol that the Golem has become fully himself, not controlled by anyone, not even his maker.

Mary Shelley's nineteenth century novel *Frankenstein* follows a similar trajectory. A brilliant scientist named Viktor Frankenstein stitches together disparate body parts stolen from raided graves, and animates it with the spark of life. He calls his creation his child, but he doesn't really think of it as more than an extension of himself. He never even gives this being a name. That the creature would have his own desires is something Dr. Frankenstein never anticipates. But the creature — what Dr. Frankenstein begins to think of as the monster — is his own being, nonetheless. And he feels lonely. He wants companionship, he wants friends, he wants love. Wherever he sees human warmth, he draws near. However, people are frightened by his appearance — the ghastly stitching together of cadavers. So he asks his creator to make for him a part-

ner, a woman crafted just like himself. This way, there could be others like him, eventually, a race. Dr. Frankenstein fully grasps that he has set into the world a new and independent creature who wishes to determine the shape of its own life. Realizing he can't control it, he declares war on his own creation, and tries to kill him.

The parallels to our creation story are unmistakable — as they should be. After all, the Talmud refers to Adam as God's golem. And, indeed, God launches us into the world, and frees us, imbuing us with free will. And human history follows. In our machzor, God alternates between seeing in us the object of his desire — be it a wife (*I remember the love of your youth*) or a son (*Ephraim is a dear son*) — and seeing in us an experiment gone awry — the flood, the faithlessness, other destructions.

We are fully actualized beings. Whatever limitations we have as individuals — moral, intellectual, physical — we each get to craft our own story, to write our own book. And for every one of us, the story we tell of ourselves is a mixed bag: our achievements, our failings, our pride, our shame. Most of all, the story that each of us comes to tell of her or his own life is the evidence of our independence from our Creator: We may excel or err. We may choose to love, to return the loving impulse of creation, or to place our love elsewhere. All our failings, one might say, come, ultimately, out of the choice to place our love elsewhere — to yearn for the false, seductive ephemeral gods of material gain, stature, power, rather than the Source of lovingkindness.

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Many of us find it difficult to narrate our faults (whether to God or other people) without also enfolded into our apologies our excuses: "I'm sorry I did such and such, but you. . ." It can be devastating to think that we, and we alone, are responsible for the consequences of our failings. We may fear that the person we wronged, our friend, our beloved, will no longer want us, if we fully own our errors. So we evade, equivocate. But the storylessness of our Yom Kippur confessional liturgy paradoxically keeps us on track,

leaving no space to interject extenuating circumstances, or to point to other culpable parties. Like the vidui bikurim, which affirms our independence as cultivators and breadwinners capable of achievement and gratitude, our confessional vidui asserts our independence of thought, desire, and action. Created beings, we have become more than an extension of our Creator, more than a character in a book written by the Divine Author. The formulaic wording of our vidui limits our impulse to craft self-serving confessions that, like Rousseau's, are not truly repentant. And the multiple repetitions of our ritual viduyyim create an inner space where we come to face ourselves, mindful of community and of God.

The liturgical images cited earlier come from a poem, Ki Hinei Ka-Homer, that compares our relationship to our yotzer, the Creator, with the power of a human yotzer, or artist, over materials of clay, metal, or glass. The poem points, of course, to God's control over us, and our powerlessness in face of God's omnipotent might. But paradoxically, it can also remind us that as God's creation set free in the world, we have a measure of control over ourselves and over how we relate to our creator.

It reminds us, too, that as independent beings who sometimes stress or sever relationships because of our desires, we also have the capacity to mend them, to invite forgiveness and love from those we've wronged, whether other people or God. In one of the biblical sources for the poem's imagery, Isaiah 64:7-8, we read:

*We are the clay, You are our Potter;
We are the work of Your hand.
Do not be angry.*

Like the creations of human artists who become independent entities, we are not compelled to match our desires to God's desires for us. We have, as they say, other options. And freedom is a heady thing. Our confessions, the viduyyim that we recite together, as a community and as a people, are a testament that we choose to place our love in our Creator, our yotzer, not out of compulsion, but out of choice. When we do so, the prophet Isaiah promises, God will choose to love us: *ki vo'alayikh osayikh* / He who made you will espouse you.

Isaiah continues with God's promise of reconciliation with His beloved creation:

*For a little while I forsook you,
 But with vast love I will bring you back.
 In slight anger, for a moment,
 I hid My face from you;
 But with kindness everlasting
 I will take you back in love. [ISA. 54:5]*

Characters in the grand book of creation, we nevertheless write own life narratives, inscribing our destinies into the book of life. Our collective viduyim, uttered aloud and together, comprise a freely chosen homage to our Author — the only kind that would be meaningful. Together, we offer and receive a gift of love and a promise of reconciliation.



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