
The Stories We Tell: Narratives in the Yom Kippur Liturgy

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SOME YEARS AGO I ATTENDED YOM KIPPUR SERVICES AT A SMALL MINYAN. DURING OUR MID-DAY DISCUSSION, THE LEADER ASKED US TO REFLECT UPON THE TENSION BETWEEN THE CONFLICTING PULLS OF personal and community needs. One after another, people felt moved to speak out of their own experiences. But not as I expected.

One woman, for example, described the strain of responding to what she characterized as the “overwhelming stresses” in her life. She listed some of them: an aging mother demanding to see more of her, three children clamoring for her close attention, a husband pressuring her to spend more time with him, a new job eating up precious time and energy. I glanced around the room, reflecting that many of us would be grateful to add to our travails what we had just now heard enumerated as hardships: a living parent, still mentally and physically able; healthy children; a loving spouse; financial security; meaningful work. Without presuming to judge her *inner* life, the texture of her *outer* life seemed to me a rich brocade. Woven of precious metal and strong silk threads, it glittered and held.

But one after another in the room spoke in the same idiom, and it struck me that somewhere along the line, we had lost our sense of blessing. What many of us call our life’s hardships are, in fact, divine gifts. The

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demands of friendship, family, fulfilling work—all of these press on us, clamor for precious time, stretch our financial resources, tire us, tax us. But they also constitute the richly textured fabric of our normal life. Other people in other times or other places would surely call our lives—even the steady flow of trials and losses—blessed. Can it be that we no longer know the blessings from the curses? If so, we can never truly feel blessed.

In addition, mired in our own sense of hardship in the midst of privilege, we may find it difficult to recognize and respond to those whose needs do not directly relate to our own, or to find a connection to anything beyond the circumscribed circle of our own lives. Indeed, what passed in that interchange for “community needs” was really an extension of self—“my” mother, “my” spouse, “my” children, “my” job. In losing our sense of blessing, our capacity for experiencing real community or connectedness also slips away.

Our tradition knows something about telling the stories of our lives. On Yom Kippur, a day of prayer and introspection, we spend the day recounting memories. We fashion narratives about ourselves—as individuals, as Jews, as humans—and about God. Embedded in these stories are our deepest yearnings, our most potent fears, our most profound struggles. Let us look at some of the narratives associated with the Yom Kippur liturgy in the hopes of learning how to tell a story of blessing in our own lives.

Some of the Yom Kippur narratives are fixed and determined; others are fluid and open. The communal narrative—recounted through the liturgy—is largely unchanging; were we to have lived two centuries ago, or find ourselves on another continent, we would recite much the same words aloud in much the same way. But alongside the public liturgy, another narrative unfolds. Privately, we each tell ourselves a more personal story—the story of our own past, where each event leads inexorably to its consequences. We search our past for signs of future happiness, but often, it seems, we come up empty. How can we change the story of our past? What’s done is done, what happened, happened.

And yet Yom Kippur is also the day when we are perhaps most keenly attuned to the call for *teshuvah*, repentance: the inner turning over of one’s past deeds that leads to an outer turning around of one’s behavior

and a returning to the divine. *Teshuvah* may be seen as the mechanism for turning around our private stories, the ones we tell to our own souls. In the process of *teshuvah*, we try to change the story of our past in the hopes of changing the story of our future.

The traditional Confession or *Viduy* hints at the liberating potential to reshape a past whose events can no longer be changed. Recited many times during the twenty-five-hour fast, the *Viduy* focuses our attention on the act of telling. In this ritual recitation of misdeeds perpetrated by all our senses and functions, more wrongdoing is connected to speech, lips, and words than any other single motif. The *Viduy* thus alerts us to the power that resides in what we say, in how we choose to recount.

What is this Confession? The traditional *Viduy* consists of a long list of sins which we have not, for the most, committed. The narration of sins has less to do with actual memory of deeds done and regretted than with the serendipity of the Hebrew alphabet, which we run through several times. In the midst of intense introspection, then, we attest out loud to wrongdoings for which we internally feel little responsibility. The traditional attitude interprets this discrepancy as an acknowledgement of communal responsibility; as individuals, we are all implicated in the actions of the community we inhabit. This explanation redeems the *Viduy* by placing it in a context that makes it meaningful. At the same time it leaves intact our tacit conviction of our own innocence: *we* ourselves did not commit those wrongdoings. But the ritualized, unchanging confession triggers also an inner, private confession, an intimate confession of sins we choose not to share publicly, perhaps because we find them too shameful, or because they implicate others. So the two confessions, the inner and the outer, take place simultaneously, the one fueling the other.

Similarly, the *Avodah*, or sacrificial worship, is a set narration which does not change. Read in the Torah and elaborated in the liturgy, the *Avodah* describes the story of ritual atonement which Aaron and later high priests performed on their own behalf and on behalf of all of Israel. In minute detail, the *Avodah* section of the liturgy depicts the selection of sacrificial animals, the priestly ceremonies of purification and atonement, the seven-fold sprinkling of ram’s blood on the altar, the ram sent to Azazel, the red thread symbolizing sinfulness which turns white as a mark of God’s forgiveness, the recitation of the awesome and ineffable Holy

Name. The *Avodah* service is high drama, and our reading of the atonement ritual is not a passive reading, but a participatory one. We retell the purification ceremony as though present during its performance. Our enactment of ritualized purification—expressed concretely in many congregations by prostrating when we read that all of Israel prostrated—resembles our reading of the Haggadah, which enjoins us to see ourselves as part of the Exodus from slavery to freedom. Similarly, it echoes the reenactment of our original presence at the Revelation at Sinai, standing as we hear the ten commandments recited in synagogue. With these acts we do not merely pay homage to the past. We tell the story *because* we were there (that is, our presence makes us eye-witnesses); and because we tell it, we *were* there (that is, our act of telling places us there).

Although the priest and the nation (and we with them) await God's forgiveness in fearful anticipation (what if God withholds mercy this time?), the narration never deviates. The red thread always turns white, and the priest always pronounces words of forgiveness. So the *Avodah* is a story we tell not only about ourselves, but about God. Through our recitation we lock God (as it were) into a narrative of forgiveness. To enter with us into this story, God must forgive us.

Just as we tell stories about God, we imagine God telling stories about us. As these accounts demonstrate, even the facts of the past may be recollected and recast in a new way. In the Rosh Hashanah liturgy, we place in God's mouth a particular version of the story of our stormy relationship. Not the way the Torah recounts it: Following the Exodus from Egypt, Israel repeatedly regresses, yearns for the fleshpots of Egypt, hungers for meat and garlic, and cannot quite shrug off an attachment to idolatry. Again and again, God rages and punishes before relenting. Instead, in *Zikhronot*, the section of Rosh Hashanah liturgy dealing with remembrance, we allow God only positive memories of our relationship: "I remember on your behalf the kindness of your youth, the love of your espousal, when you followed after me in the wilderness in a land not cultivated." We imagine God remembering us as young lovers, as honeymooners, with the "stiff-necked" incidents of rebellion no more than marital spats. We cite God asking rhetorically, "Is Ephraim my son dear to me? Is he a pleasant child? Even as I speak

against him, I will surely have mercy on him." The words we put into God's mouth on Rosh Hashanah anticipate that, come Yom Kippur, God will have compassion upon us.

The Yom Kippur liturgy echoes this narrative strategy. The *U-Netaneh Tokef*, for example, begins by imagining a distant God who records, remembers, and judges. In this moving meditation, God recollects the intricate and forgotten details of each person's life, meting out harsh punishments. Yet by the end of the prayer the God of judgment transmutes into the God of mercy—at first passing sinners beneath his shepherd's crook, and then passing over sins and absolving them. The truncated human story—exemplified by the possibility of death through fire, water, sword, wild beasts, hunger—yields to open-endedness. The saving possibilities of "Repentance, Prayer, and Charity" suggest that no story is unchangeable, not even the celestial narrative of human destiny.

The revised narratives placed in God's mouth and mind by the High Holiday liturgy serve as metaphors for our own internal processes. There is an analogous relationship between God's retelling the story of human behavior and our reframing of our own life's narrative. In recasting past deeds in a favorable light and so freeing up potential futures, the God envisioned in the liturgy suggests that we need not be stuck in failure, that our past need not doom us.

The Book of Jonah, read on Yom Kippur afternoon, illustrates this potential for change, for re-vision. Jonah himself remains closed to this possibility. When God charges Jonah with warning the people of Nineveh that their sinful ways will bring destruction, he refuses. Each year, each Yom Kippur, Jonah is condemned to make the same error. Each year, he thinks—what's past is past. Each year, he assumes that the past dictates an unchangeable future. But Jonah's reluctant admonition to the people of Nineveh prompts them to think about their past. Under the impetus of his unwilling prophecy, they begin to tell their story a different way, to see their behavior in a new light. They change their attitude towards the story of their past and, in so doing, change the story of their future. They repent, melt the divine wrath, avert catastrophe, and prosper. The intended curse transmutes into blessing.

Ne'ilah, the concluding service, anticipates the closing of heaven's gates, opened specially for Yom Kippur. "Open the gate for us, even at the

closing of the gate, for day is nearly past.” For us, the prayer affirms, the gates can open whenever we turn to them. The possibility of re-vision (seeing differently, telling differently, doing differently) remains ever open.

The fixed and unchanging narratives of the Yom Kippur liturgy, paradoxically reiterating the theme of change and revision, can awaken our own interpretive powers and the inner shifts of *teshuvah*. So, too, we can reframe the fixed and unchangeable facts of our lives, permitting us to recognize new possibilities where we saw none before. May we see blessings wherever they reside, revealed or hidden. And in owning our blessings, may we learn to share them, to spread them, so that they encompass our neighbors, our communities, and all of creation.

