

Confession: Taking Responsibility for Your Actions

A Sermon for the High Holy Days by Senior Rabbi Amy Schwartzman

Temple Rodef Shalom

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This past winter I joined the millions of Americans who get hooked on reality shows. Actually it was only one reality show, and, actually it only had 6 episodes. And, actually, I was only able to watch 2 of those – but this show really caught my interest and I felt ‘hooked.’

The series was not one of the more popular ones – about desert islands or princesses or the race to find a treasure. Perhaps you won’t be surprised to know that this was a religious reality show! Yes, they even produce reality programs for America’s clergy! It was called The Monastery and it was the real life experience of 6 men who spent 6 weeks at the Christ in the Desert Monastery in New Mexico.

One of the episodes made an enormous impression on me. It was the episode where the 6 men made their first confessions. It was an intense segment which really took me by surprise. I was not surprised by what the men said in their confessions, but rather by how the priests explained the true purpose and potential of this ritual.

I will admit that in the past, whenever I heard the word “confession” I thought of the confession booth that I’ve seen in so many movies - that small room where the priest sits on one side and the sinner on the other. It’s dark and everyone is whispering. Perhaps some of you think of this too. I also have to admit, with sincere apologies to the Catholics who are here, that I never really understood the Catholic approach to confession. Misinformed, I thought it was like a ‘get out of jail free’ card. You list your sins, the priest gives you absolution, you say some extra prayers in the form of penance and you are white as snow. Of course, that is not the way it works at all. Only after seeing my reality show, did I begin to understand what confession is truly about. A person who comes to the priest, aware of her sin, taking responsibility for her actions, and willing to acknowledge out loud her failing is ready to be instructed on a course of action called penance that involves prayer, deeds and personal change. Further, the main purpose of this process is to remove the oppressive veil that sin inflicts on one’s true self. Who we really are - alone, in relation with others, and with God - can only be known or experienced when the true self is not clouded by sin.

My interest in this new understanding of confession led me to do some reading about Catholic theology. I even wrote an e-mail to the monk I saw on TV and he even wrote back to me. Interestingly but probably not surprisingly, every time I mentioned this topic to my colleagues or friends – they’d become very uncomfortable. Confession is a word that seems to make Jews very uneasy. Most people’s first comment was something like: “it’s just not a Jewish thing.” Or “That’s not part of our tradition – confession belongs with the Catholics.”

Today if we follow our *machzor* carefully, we will realize that such thinking is not at all true. We may be uncomfortable with the word, but the act of confessing (in Hebrew *vidui*) is deeply rooted in our tradition. During this Yom Kippur we will confess 10 different times, in the form of 3 different public prayers as well as one private prayer. You know these prayers; they are the *ashamnu*, the *al chet* and the prayer that the cantor sings called *tavo lifanecha*. Confession or *vidui* is a major theme of our liturgy on this Day of Repentance. What's more, those who are familiar with the daily service know that we Jews actually confess every day during the *Amidah* section of our service. Finally, less well known to most people is the Jewish tradition of a deathbed *vidui*: a confessional prayer recited by a person who is dying or another person on his behalf.

So, you might be wondering...if our tradition does indeed have many Jewish expressions of confession, what is it about the Catholic custom that has intrigued me so this past year? Why have I found their ritual so compelling? The answer dates back over 15 years ago to an experience I had early in my rabbinate. A man in the hospital asked for a rabbi and I agreed to visit him. He was not a member of our congregation. I didn't know him or his family. When I arrived the room was crowded with people. Clearly the family had gathered to be with him during his final hours. His wife was there and a number of grown children, all standing quietly, one might have thought stoically, around the room. His breathing was labored and he was only able to whisper. I sat down near the head of the bed and spoke with the man. Would he like to say the *shema*? Would he like the family to sing to him? He turned to me and said that he wanted to say the *vidui*. He was obviously a knowledgeable Jew aware of this lesser known custom. Trying hard not to panic having never experienced this before, I explained the tradition of the deathbed confession to everyone. Slowly and laboriously he spoke. Out loud he acknowledged the mistakes he had made in his life, some with his business, some with his friends. And then, at the end, he confessed that he had been mean to his family. He had withheld his love; he had shamed his children into doing things the way he wanted them done; he was controlling; he was basically a tyrant. No one said a word. I, myself, was paralyzed. Then the man said: "I wish I could have acknowledged this sooner, maybe I would have changed." Slowly, the family began to respond. The stoic group began to soften. There were tears and a few words shared. But no one jumped to forgive him either. After many awkward moments, I encouraged the family to join in a prayer for healing – both for this man and of course for them, his children who obviously suffered from their father's abuse. Eventually, I left. When I returned to the hospital days later he was not there. I assume he died. I wish I knew what happened to that family. Did they forgive him? I wish I knew how hearing his confession changed them. It certainly changed me.

This traditional Jewish deathbed *vidui* is the closest I've ever been to a Catholic confession. This experience, stored deep in my memory for many years, came back to me after watching *The Monastery*. So did the intense emotions that I experienced that day. What I now realize is that the act of speaking our sins aloud is a transformative and deeply powerful deed. To

audibly articulate our transgressions, even if only to ourselves, is to take our sins out of hiding and place them in our world where they can and must be addressed. To name a sin is to own it, and only when we own our sins can we begin to restore the damage they've caused us as well as others. The Catholics seem to understand this but I'm not sure that we Jews do.

To return to the gentleman in the hospital - this man seemed very connected to Jewish tradition, and I can only assume that he participated in dozens of Yom Kippur observances. Had he never seen himself in the *Ashamnu*? Had he never connected his actions to the words he spoke – *al chet shechatanu lefanecha...* for the sin we have sinned against you... by the abuse of power, or by our anger, or by not loving those we claim to love. Did he think that those words were for others? If our tradition had asked him to speak his own individual sins out loud, would this man have changed before he lay on his death bed?

Today, we will recite those very same confessional prayers. Many are poetic, stirring and challenging – but few are individual. During these 24 hours we will confess in one unified voice. For 9 prayers we will refrain from saying “I”, our confession will always be in the plural. All of us will share the same long list of transgressions. In our list there will be some sins for which we are guilty, there will be others for which we hold no guilt – but we will say them anyway. Only once today will we have time for individual confession, but it will be silent and even that will be scripted for us. Our ritual is very different from our Catholic neighbors. It is public and plural and planned out for us. Theirs is individual, personal and shared with only one other person. Interestingly, both traditions instituted confession rituals at the same period of time, the Middle-Ages, but isn't it curious that they took radically different paths.

Much has been written to try to explain how we arrived at our current ritual. I assure you that there is much value in our communal approach. But many have wondered why our *vidui* is so generalized and impersonal, why we stand before God and take responsibility for sins we haven't committed, why we drown out the individual by way of one communal voice?

In typical Jewish fashion there are a number of answers. One response suggests that we read all of these prayers aloud and in the plural because this acts as a shield for those who need to confess. When all the congregants lift up their voices and say... “We have sinned by...” no one knows who is truly confessing to the misdeed.

Another theory asserts that when each of us as individuals associates ourselves with the community we acknowledge that there is a collective guilt in which all of us must share. Consider the following: I doubt if even one of us has deliberately oppressed someone – a sin which we acknowledge in the *al chet*. However, we live in a society where oppression takes place. We live in a society that allows the horrendous goings-on in Darfur to continue. We live in an area that has not done enough to solve its plight of the homeless. I have not intentionally oppressed anyone in my life. I do not intend to start now. Still, I am culpable. I am culpable

because I have allowed a society to develop and exist where such oppression can occur. Even where we are not guilty, we have a hand in allowing the realities of our world to continue. The Talmud teaches us – *shtikah k'hodayah* – our silence shouts our approval. The list of sins we recite are indeed our sins – a few are personal, many are communal, all are societal and we must confess.

This approach to confession is very compelling and very Jewish. We are a tradition rooted in the concept of community and communal responsibility. What's more, I believe that our collective confession is not only about words. It is about you and me and how we might grow in our relationship from the experience of a shared *vidui*. We are a large family that stands to support one another and to remind ourselves of our responsibilities to each other, in spite of all of our misdeeds. This is what it means to be a member of a Jewish congregation and we willingly share in our collective *vidui*.

And yet, I suggest today, that there might be a lost opportunity in our Jewish approach. My brief encounter with The Monastery has left me to wonder... what are we as Jews missing by not confessing our own unique, individual sins out loud – to someone, to a person we know, to an impartial party or even to a website? I am not suggesting that we change the way our tradition approaches *vidui*. Our communal confession has the potential to be very powerful and to lead us to action in some realms. I am interested in understanding though, what might be gained by an additional approach, one we might learn from our Catholic neighbors?

Let me share one other less personal experience that I have had with this concept or confession. I have a friend who, in our younger years, had a problem with lying. He also had a problem with stomach ulcers. He could never eat spicy foods or have too much coffee or wine. Just a few years ago, when he was in town for a meeting, we met up for dinner. He chose a Mexican restaurant and seemed to enjoy a plate full of jalapeños and a beer. I inquired about his ulcers and he said he had been cured. I imagined some gastroenterologist solving his problem. He corrected me and explained that the doctor who helped him was a head guy not a stomach guy. He had shared that he had a lot to tell to a good therapist and in doing so, his ulcers disappeared. His therapist was his confessor.

This example makes sense when we consider that our secrets are simply parts of our life stories, our 'selves' that have been forced into hiding. We all have a deep psychological need to be accepted as we really are, but that can never happen as long as there are parts of us that no one sees or knows. We conceal aspects of ourselves that we think invite rejection, but ironically, the very act of secrecy makes us inaccessible to others. We think we're hiding our secrets, but really, our secrets are hiding us.

Confession is a very powerful tool. Some of us may stay away from it because we imagine it is about shame, but it is not, it is about awareness, change and ultimately healing. Keeping my sin inside myself, it grows like a cancer in my body. Unchecked, it becomes larger and larger;

it begins to control me, to alter my personality, to veil my true self. I no longer know who I truly am – alone, in association with others and in my covenantal relationship with my God.

Yom Kippur is the day for us to more sincerely address and embrace our *vidui*, our Jewish confession. In the words of Rabbi Hillel: if not now, when? We must begin with our own tradition. All day long we will confess together singing: *ashamnu, bagadnu, gazalu...* we are guilty, we are traitorous, we have taken from others. All day we will admit our transgressions together reciting: *al chet shechatanu...* for the sin we have committed against You. If we are to take the *vidui* seriously we must first find our personal “I” inside the “We.” It is easy to hide within the group, to let other voices carry the burden of the sin that we have committed in some form. Dare I suggest that we change the text and individualize a prayer that has existed in the plural for over a thousand years? Can I say “I” when others around me are saying “we?” If not aloud, can we work to assure that we ourselves hear the “I” within each communal confession?

And can we go even further? Could we consider actually speaking our own misdeeds out loud? Perhaps we could start by doing this alone – when no one is at home, or when we are by ourselves in the car. Just to hear our own voice tell the tale, recount the deed, or describe the mistake can open a door for change, resolution and restitution. In our tradition, words spoken aloud, matter. The best proof of this is in the creation story where God established the world by speaking. Surely, an omnipotent God does not need to speak to create matter. Couldn't God have simply imagined the world and it would have existed? No one was even there to hear God yet God's voice is somehow intrinsic to the story. Our voices too are intrinsic to the stories we tell. Once released from within us, we are free to continue the tale, to add new chapters, to correct misdeeds or re-create the ending.

And what if another person were sitting next to us when we revealed our dark secret? Another human being whose compassionate eyes will offer us a thoughtful and considered response. We may fear that the experience will be one of embarrassment and rejection, but the humanity in this person could provide a response of acceptance and understanding. Together we think aloud about how to right this wrong. Maybe this person shares his/her own secret and together we realize that in our mistakes we are not alone and more: in our journey toward repentance and healing we share the road with many fellow travelers.

Imagine if the man who lay in the hospital bed had addressed his abusive behavior earlier in his life. His family need not have known that he had a confessor. Perhaps that scene in the hospital would have been different; the moment of *vidui* would have been one of love and acceptance as a result of his confession and the change it brought about. I have been with many people as they faced the final hours of their lives. Few have had the courage to share a personal *vidui*, but I wonder how many lie there with regrets. Regrets they might have been able to address; deeds they might have been able to change; relationships they might have been able to restore if only they had been willing to recognize their sin, to speak it aloud; to

invite another person to hold their hand as they came face to face with their sin and heart to heart with their true self.

Today, this Yom Kippur invites us to begin a process of honesty, responsibility and change; a process that will enable our final moments – may they be many, many years away - to be ones of wholeness and peace instead of pain and shame. We are invited to share in a *vidui*, a uniquely Jewish public confessional, where we take communal responsibility for our actions. Today, I encourage you to go further, to find your own “I” within our shared “We.” In which prayer will you recognize yourself? To what will you finally admit? When will you hear yourself take responsibility for your actions? In the famous text the Pirke Avot we are instructed to “repent every day, for we never know which day will be out last.” How very true these words are. I would add that we must repent everyday in order to live our lives to their fullest, to grow, to love and just to be at our best. So, let us not wait... to speak the words... to acknowledge the deeds... to change our lives.

Amen

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