

Yom Kippur Dvar Torah 2018 - 5778

By Joel Lazar

We have become guilty. We have betrayed. We have robbed. We have spoken slander... We have caused wickedness. We have sinned wilfully. We have extorted. We have accused falsely. We have been deceitful... We have been obstinate... We have corrupted. We have been abominable. We have strayed. You have let us go astray.

That passage comes from the *Ashamnu* prayer which we say numerous times today. If I conducted a poll of this congregation about whether that passage speaks to you personally, I'd expect a majority to say: "Not so much". It's a common grievance of the modern Jew, that: "the prayers don't speak to me" or "I couldn't relate". And often, after some historical or literary digging, with a few caveats and exceptions, and with sheer force of will, we can often salvage the text from its ostensible incoherence.

So, when I delved deep into the *machzor* text this year in preparation for today, I noticed in the vast majority of the text an obstruction that threatens to undermine the entire purpose of Yom Kippur; perhaps the entire purpose of being alive.

Over the next fifteen minutes I want to get to the bottom of it and in so doing, not only help restore some of the lost relevance of the text, but to give each of us a tool for ongoing growth, wholeness and integrity in our everyday lives. And in true Jewish style, I expect to have many questions and not that many answers, so I want this exploration to be the beginning, not the end, of an important discussion about the essence of Repentance.

What are we trying to do?

But before I explore this huge obstacle in my way, I need to understand my destination. And in one word, that is: *T'shuva*. Repentance. Or more correctly, a *returning*, or – a *turning*. The gift of today is an unparalleled opportunity for me – Yoel Peretz Lazar – to turn away from my lesser self and return to my greater self.

And how is this enormous task achieved? The Sages explain that, while difficult, it is also quite simple and requires only two things:

One: Remorse for my past misdeeds; and

Two: A commitment to never repeat them again.

That is the entire purpose of this time of year – two very clear things. Taking personal ownership over *my* misdeeds and commit that *I* never repeat them again.

I appreciate that not everyone comes to shule for this lofty goal today; some come because their parents asked them to, some come because it's the best time of year to sit quietly next to your kids.

Some come for the vibe – the tunes, the gravity, the permission to be sombre. These are all perfectly fair reasons and, historically, they remain *my* key reasons for being here.

But let's say this year I wanted to do something more: to fess up, break free of my past, and actually *change*? Let's say I wanted to get to the heart of *T'shuva*, which has a clear 2-step formula? Well, in that case, the *machzor*, indeed the entire Yom Kippur service, seems to really miss the mark.

Issues of incoherence

The obvious reasons for this, is that we recite and listen to the prayers in *Hebrew*, a language many of us do not fluently speak. What's worse, the Hebrew is archaic, and many Israelis would even struggle with it.

But even if I *did* understand the basic meaning of the words, the key confessional prayers, such as “*al chet she'chatanu*”, are sweeping shopping list of sins, some of which include: bribery, cheating my fellow man, and entrapping my neighbour. Now, I've looked within me and I can confidently declare that I did not do any of these things over the last year, and probably ever. I cannot feel remorseful about, and change direction from, sins that I never committed. That *is* not, and *cannot*, be the process of *T'shuva*.

Many explain that we recite shopping lists of sins, even if we didn't *personally* commit all of them, because each Jew is responsible for the other (*Kol Yisrael Arevim Zeh La-Zeh*). It's a nice idea and it may explain the importance of giving tzedakah, for example, but it contributes very little to making me, personally, confront my actual failings.

To a degree, these shopping lists don't surprise me. Imagine if Shira pasted a full-page advert in the Jewish News that read: *At Shira's Yom Kippur service this year, you'll confront the dark and flawed parts of yourself that you prefer to keep hidden, thereby having a chance at true and honest reform?*

Most people would go to Mizrahi.

The prime issue: First person plural

Now, the obstacles I've just spoken about are not even the main obstacles. Because even if I *understood* the words, and even if the words *did* represent actual areas of my life that needed urgent reform, I would still face a far deeper obstacle – *a subtle point of language that for me has wide psychological ramifications*.

Let me explain.

You will notice that many of the *tefillot* today are written in first person **plural**. Let's look at some examples:

*U'mipnei chataenu*¹ – “Because of **our** sins, **we** have been exiled from **our** land and sent far from **our** soil.”

Or take this tefilla:

***Our** God and the God of **our** ancestors, pardon **our** transgressions on this Day of Atonement. Wipe away and remove **our** wilful sins and errors...*

Or take this one:

Al chet she'chatanu - For the sin that **we** have sinned before You under duress and willingly; and for the sin that **we** have sinned before You through hardness of the heart.

So, what's the problem with all of this? These prayers sound apt and grave for a grave day such as this?

Our Sages have all kinds of reasons for this collective form of prayer. Maimonides explains in the *Laws of Repentance*² that even though *individuals* benefit greatly from asking for forgiveness on Yom Kippur, the Repentance of the **congregation** is *always* accepted. One possible explanation given by the Talmud for this, is that “the prayer of the community is not rejected... due to its many merits”.³

It's an interesting claim: some individuals may have very few merits at this important time, and the last thing that you want to be doing is standing before the Chief Justice of the *Highest* Court with very little to show for yourself. However, if we come as a group of defendants (much like a Class Action), then *surely* some members of our group will have merits that will assist all the individuals within the group to secure a favourable judgment. This argument is bolstered through various poems in the *machzor* which ask God to remember the excellent virtues of our forefathers and mothers in the hope that these fond, cosmic memories may be counted in each of our individual favours.

And **still**, somehow all these ideas utterly fail to help *me*, Yoel Peretz Lazar, turn away from the things that I, personally, have done wrong. If anything, all of this is one huge distraction.

Moreso, to my knowledge, there is no responsibility to do *collective T'shuva* – it only rests with the individual. Indeed, Maimonides explains⁴ that the original Biblical command does not even *mention T'shuva*, but rather *confession*, a process which R. Shimshon Raphael Hirsch explains is a deeply personal and individual one. R. Hirsch explains that in confession, *viduy*, we must each say the following:

¹ Artscroll *machzor*, p489.

² 2:6.

³ Avodah Zarah 4b.

⁴ Laws of Repentance 1:1.

“Oh God, I have erred and sinned, I have been disobedient before You, I have done so-and-so, I am sorry and I am ashamed of what I have done, and will never do it again.”

Then, R Hirsh instructs the following:

Feel in yourself how every sin you have committed, however small, even in the mind and heart, immediately brings with it a curse, namely, that it makes you less capable of doing good, and further inclined to sin; and when you have recognised this, then you can lay the future of your inner and outer life in the just and forgiving hand of God.

And as you see yourself in spirit, so confess in word, in order that the picture of your self-abasement may become external to you and stand before you, making it not a passing emotion but a permanent mood and frame of mind which can bear fruit in practical conduct.

We all know that the thoughts of our mind have far less power than the words we articulate? Why else would it be so hard to *speak* truth, when it is so easy to *think* it? Why else would it be so hard to admit fault, when we so readily feel it?

And yet the vast majority of the language we use today does not help us fulfil R. Hirsch’s ideas. Between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we have Ten Days of Repentance and are encouraged to enumerate and take full personal responsibility for all of our wrongs and commit to a different path. And yet, many of us have not had a chance to do that properly yet, or at all. Indeed, most of the *slichot* recited on those ten days also fail for the same reasons that the *machzor* fails.

The beginning of a response...

So, after all of this – what are we to do?

Dr Louis Newman, a Jewish ethicist and Director of Judaic Studies at Carleton College, Minnesota, writes beautifully on Repentance. And his insights come not only from his academic expertise, but his life learning. Louis Newman is a recovering alcoholic of over 15 years. When Krista Tippett asked him in an interview in 2015 about his process of recovery, I heard in his reply a possible answer to all of these questions.

He said:

I joined a recovery group 14 years ago, and I've been going regularly ever since. And it's a profound experience in a lot of ways, partly because it's in the context of a very safe space of other people, who are coming to terms with their own failings and their own addictions of various kinds... where you actually have the freedom to say: “I did this. I drank to excess. I did these other things and lied about them. I did all of these things that I'm ashamed of.”

And say that out loud, and know that the circle in which you're sitting is a circle of people who will accept you and support you in your desire to own those things, and repent for them, and become a different kind of person.

What Newman's experiences begin to tell me is that the group, or the congregation in our case, is not an end of itself, despite how the Yom Kippur service might appear. Rather, the group is merely the container necessary for holding us in our personal journeys.

As Newman explains: *The work is **our own**...but the process... is **communal**.*⁵

*The work is **our own**...but the process... is **communal**.*

The power of “I-Statements”

So, if the process is “communal”, how do I make this Repentance work “my own”?

If there are any Jews in this room who have been to therapy before (is the Pope Catholic?), they will likely have come across the idea of “I-Statements”. “I-Statements”, advocated by famous psychologist Carl Rogers, are linguistic constraints that help the speaker take responsibility for their thoughts and actions.

So, for example, if someone asked me: *What are you finding difficult about work at the moment?* I could respond with similar ideas in two very different ways:

Without an I-Statement, I could respond: *It's infuriating how in offices people can walk by each other in the hallway and not even say hello. It's a disrespectful work environment.*

A similar idea, using an I-Statement, could be: *I feel furious when people walk by me in the hallway and do not even say hello. I feel disrespected and unseen.*

The two sentences feel different.

Here's another example, of someone speaking to their partner or spouse: *You're always coming home late from work, and it's clear that you're prioritising the office over our family.*

Alternatively, using an I-Statement, the person could say: *When you come home late from work, we don't get to spend much time together as a family which makes me feel disheartened and quite lonely.*

What I deeply want, and what *t'shuva* desperately needs, is a *machzor* filled with space for I-Statements.

Here's Louis Newman again, explaining why this matters:

...each transgression is an opportunity to go: now why did I do that? Why did I speak ill of that person behind their back? Or why did I snap at my spouse? Or scream at my kids, or

⁵ <https://onbeing.org/programs/louis-newman-the-refreshing-practice-of-repentance/>.

*whatever I might have done on a given day. What was it going on for me that made me do something that I'm now regretting? **And to know that about myself is to know where the growing edge of my moral life is.** And to be able to then move beyond the behavior of the past.*⁶

This is Newman giving us a pile of I-Statements. And they really feel like the right questions to ask on the road to *t'shuva*. But they also feel damn hard to ask and say, because I-Statements make the speaker far more vulnerable than they'd like to be; they force the person to admit their deep truths, their hurts and their wounds.

Newman articulates this difficulty quite nicely, as well as the power that comes from meeting the challenge head on:

*...when we don't own our transgressions...we run from them, which is, after all, the most natural thing to do. "I did something wrong, I cheated someone, I told a lie about something, I took credit for something I shouldn't have" — whatever it was...our immediate instinct, often, is to run away from it. Or to hide it. Or to lie about what we did wrong so that nobody will find out... And in doing that we're in **bondage** to the thing that we've done.*

*By owning [our actions] and then claiming them... — **only then are we really free of it.***

*The ultimate benefit of doing teshuvah is that it offers us a way to overcome our past **precisely** because we have confronted and taken full responsibility for it. It enables us to escape the sense of guilt — in some cases, even despair — with which many of us live.*⁷

We have this unique few hours each year, where our tradition has given us permission – has asked us *specifically* – to value and pursue our own recovery; to identify, from an honest place of “I”, those dark things we bury deep: shame, guilt, regret, incompleteness.

“The work is our own, but the process is communal...”

So, I have **two** final thoughts on what this “communal process” may actually be about. Perhaps the collective nature of today is not about reciting other people’s sins as our own or co-opting the Rabbis’ poetic expressions of their own personal struggles. Perhaps the plurality of today is nothing more than the *container* – the space within which, once a year, 500 incomplete people can stand beside one another and affirm each other’s inherent worth and dignity before God. It is a reminder that only *with others* am I able to achieve true *t'shuva* – I can only achieve it by showing my true vulnerability, weakness and failings to those who *choose* to accept me with love and compassion.

⁶ <https://onbeing.org/programs/louis-newman-the-refreshing-practice-of-repentance/>.

⁷ <https://www.jta.org/2010/08/31/life-religion/understanding-the-lost-art-of-repentance-and-its-urgency>.

My Viduy

And so, it is in this moment that I hope to reclaim some of the Yom Kippur prayers and the essence of *t'shuva*. From these learnings I now have permission to say:

I, Yoel Peretz Lazar, son of Rachel and Victor, stuffed up this last year. I did not spend nearly enough meaningful time with my nanna and now, in the last two weeks, her cognition has rapidly declined as she enters the abyss of Dementia and now it's too late for any more yarns.

I, Yoel Peretz Lazar, over the last year, understood the importance of the commandment to respect one's mother and father. And yet too many of my discussions with my Mum and Dad over the last year were short, impatient and unforgiving.

I, Yoel Peretz Lazar, have for a long time struggled, and still struggle, to relate to the word "Love". And because of the baggage it carries for me, I rarely say "I Love You" to the people I love most.

Those were some of my I-Statements. Each of you will have your own.

Our Sages explain that this process won't reverse my wrongs or undo the past – I won't get back the unspoken conversations with my nanna. I cannot return to each moment of love and say: *"I change my mind. What I meant to say instead of my deflecting humour was: I Love You. And thank you."*

But the Sages *do* make clear that on this day, through the personal work we each undertake, our failings will be transformed into merits. And while those failings cause tears in the cosmic fabric, our Repentance sews them up. And all of this can only be achieved if you stand beside me, knowing that I am flawed, just as I stand beside you.

Gmar chatima tova.