

Parashat Tzav

Candid Confessions

A prerequisite of halachically valid *teshuvah* (repentance) is *vidui* (confession). At least three biblical verses substantiate its necessity, its centrality even. The earliest source for the obligation to confess can be traced to the laws of the sacrifices, the subject matter of both *Parashat Vayikra* and *Parashat Tzav*. In them, the Torah requires the offeror to lean their hands on the animal and confess (Leviticus 5:5).

Beyond the context of sacrifices, the Torah later says that “if a man or woman commits any of man’s sins... They must confess the sin they have committed” (Numbers 5:6-7). The Rambam codified this in the very first law of his laws of repentance: “This refers to verbal *vidui*. This *vidui* is a positive commandment.”¹

Finally, the Ramban understood a passage near the end of the Torah to refer to *teshuvah*: “For this commandment that I command you today is neither beyond you nor distant from you... It is exceedingly close to you, in your mouth and in your heart to do” (Deuteronomy 30:11,14). Beyond context, a clue that this refers to *teshuvah* is that it says “in your mouth,” which can be interpreted as a reference to the integral verbal component of *vidui*.²

Having established that *vidui* is a sine qua non for *teshuvah*, we must now probe the whys and wherefores. What makes verbal expression of our sins so integral to repentance? Why would the Rambam declare our regret over the past and commitment to future change of no halachic consequence without confession?

Vidui’s Indispensability

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik drew a comparison to property law, which has the principle, “matters of the heart are inconsequential” (דברים שבלב אינן דברים).³ In the Rav’s words:

Feelings, emotions, thoughts, and ideas crystallize only after explicit verbal expression. A man knows and thinks many ideas which he cannot bring to his lips. Man can construct many psychological defenses within himself, refusing to

¹ *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Teshuvah*, 1:1. Rabbi Yosef Babad wrote in his *Minchat Chinuch* that according to the Rambam only *vidui*, and not *teshuvah* is a mitzvah. This is because it is inconceivable for a Jew to remain sunk in sin without wanting to repent, obviating the need for any divine legislation. The Rav found it hard “to accept this supposition expounded by *Minchas Chinuch*, and my father my teacher told me that my grandfather rejected it outright, citing the fact that the Torah, in a number of places, explicitly refers to repentance as a precept. [...] Do we really need evidence of this sort? Can one contemplate the possibility that confession be considered a precept while repentance is not? What would be the significance of confession without repentance?” (Weiss, *Insights*, 148–149).

² Ramban on Deuteronomy 30:11. See further *Parashat Nitzavim*, “Better to Have Sinned.”

³ *Kidushin* 49b.

acknowledge harsh reality. *Vidui* forces man to admit the facts as they really are, to express the painful truth.⁴

In this context, the Rav quoted the shocking informal proclamation made after the passing of Rabbi Yehudah ha-Nasi, the compiler of the Mishnah: “Whoever states that Rebbe died shall be run through with a sword.”⁵ The truth of his death was too painful to hear expressed. “Man buries the truth as long as the truth is not verbalized.”⁶ *Vidui* ensures that we do not fool ourselves or evade the harsh reality of our failings. Without facing the unvarnished truth, any resolutions we make are not grounded in reality.

Furthermore, *vidui* is intrinsic to repentance precisely because of the emotional distress it causes. It is terribly painful to admit facts as they really are. “Our natural inclination,” the Rav said, is “to run and hide.” We prefer to discount the lingering spiritual pains of sin, no different from our attitude to the nagging symptoms of a potentially serious illness, and push off doing what needs to be done.⁷ It is agonizing “to tear down the screen, to put into words what our hearts have already determined.”⁸ This can explain why the Rambam adds to his formulation of the *vidui* the word *boshti*, “I am ashamed.”⁹ The emotional pain is so searing that it is cathartic and cleansing. Only then is change possible.

For these reasons, *vidui* should be more expansive than the barebones formulation provided by the Rambam and other halachists. It should be an outpouring of the soul from a wellspring of deep contrition. The Rambam states: “Whoever confesses profusely (לל המרבה) and elaborates on this is worthy of praise (הרי זה משובח).”¹⁰ These words echo what we find in the Haggadah about the mitzvah of recounting the story of the Exodus on Pesach night, “Whoever narrates profusely...is worthy of praise” (לל המרבה לספר... הרי זה משובח). In both instances there is a set text, but we are to set it to the tune of our personal feelings and words.

God's Extended Hand

Part of what supplies the confidence for pouring our hearts out in *vidui* is knowing that our words will not fall on deaf ears. God listens and compassionately helps us return to our true selves and to Him.

In her memoir about her upbringing in the Soloveitchik home in Lithuania, Shulamith Soloveitchik Meiselman, the Rav's sister, described her father Rabbi Moshe Soloveichik delivering his addresses on *Shabbat Shuvah*, the Shabbat before Yom Kippur. He would admonish the people of the town “for the evil they committed, for turning away from the path of righteousness, for not caring for the poor, the orphans, and the widows.” Still, “at the same

⁴ *Chumash Mesoras Harav*, 3:23.

⁵ *Ketubot* 104a.

⁶ *Chumash Mesoras Harav*, 3:24.

⁷ Soloveitchik, *On Repentance*, 195.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 95.

⁹ *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Teshuvah*, 1:1.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

time he would assure the town's Jews that God is merciful and gracious and never forsakes the sinner."¹¹

The Rav followed in his father's footsteps. In his discussion of *vidui*, he emphasized God's everlasting patience and mercy, too. The Talmud wonders why the verse states God's name twice, "Hashem, Hashem..." (Exodus 34:6), and answers that the first refers to God before man sins, and the second to God afterwards.¹² Rabbeinu Tam said that these refer to "two attributes" of God.¹³ The Rav explicated his opinion:

When man sins, he creates a distance between himself and God [...] The end result of sinning is the driving out, as it were, of the Holy Presence. But who, then, will take care of the sinner after the Holy One removes Himself and the sinner is left alone? [...] Who will extend a helping hand to rescue him from the quicksand into which he has sunk?¹⁴

The Rav answers his own question with a quote from the High Holiday prayers: "You extend a hand to sinners and Your right arm stretches forth to receive the penitent." According to the Rav, the verse indicates that sin pushes God away from the sinner, but the *Shechinah*, the loving and motherly attribute of the Almighty, always remains ready and willing to help the sinner return.¹⁵ As the Talmud says, "Whenever the Jewish people sin they should come before me with this liturgy, and I will forgive them."¹⁶

Yet there appears to be at least one prominent exception to this categorial statement in one of the most troubling stories recorded in the Talmud. Of the thousand or so sages that dot the pages of the Talmud, the one who most notoriously came to reject his religious commitment to Judaism was Elisha b. Avuyah, known as Acher. This name was first given to him by a harlot he visited, who exclaimed that he could not possibly be the sage Elisha b. Avuyah but must be "someone else," in Hebrew, *acher*. The name stuck. His star student Rabbi Meir ran after him and called upon him to repent, but Elisha did not respond because he heard a voice calling, "'Repent, wayward children' (Jeremiah 3:14)—everyone except Acher."¹⁷

The Rav brilliantly reanalyzed this passage to mean the opposite of what it sounds like. God was actually extending a hand to Elisha b. Avuyah. Only Acher could not repent, but Elisha would be welcomed back with open arms. So long as he identified as Acher, he would not be able to do *teshuvah*. Only when he realized that Acher did not define him, that he was truly Elisha inside, would he find his way back. The verse tells the rebellious "children" of God to repent, and indeed any and all can do so, if they accept that they are God's child and not someone else. Not someone estranged from themselves and from God.

¹¹ Soloveitchik Meiselman, *Soloveitchik Heritage*, 145–146.

¹² *Rosh ha-Shanah* 17b.

¹³ *Tosafot* ad loc., s.v. שלש עשרה מדות.

¹⁴ Soloveitchik, *On Repentance*, 84–85.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 86.

¹⁶ *Rosh ha-Shanah* 17b.

¹⁷ *Chagigah* 15a.

The Talmud reports that Acher did eventually confess and died crying. Rabbi Meir said, “My master departed while doing *teshuvah*.”¹⁸

Exploring the Rav's Insight

The Jewish people have an unusual custom on Yom Kippur: we chant our confessions. Why do we recite the litany of wrongdoing to a not particularly doleful tune? The Rav observed that this only occurs when the community comes together to collectively renounce our sins. The individual, on the other hand, weeps during *vidui*. The collective is a microcosm of the Jewish people, of *Keneset Yisra'el*, which is assured forgiveness. “The Jewish people do not come to *plead* for atonement; it claims it as its right.”¹⁹ The melody reflects our confident reliance on God’s promise of clemency.

We look forward to a time when sin will evaporate from the earth, but until then each of us has faith that we have the capacity to properly express the *vidui* and to do complete *teshuvah*. As the Rav remarked, “Not only is the Jew capable of repentance, it is his final destiny.”²⁰

¹⁸ Rabbi Y. Y. Jacobson, “The Holy Heretic,” based an address of the Rav in 1961 to Mizrahi in Atlantic City, N.J., <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zsO3KIZsnok> (accessed April 11, 2021). See Talmud Yerushalmi, *Chagigah*, 2:1.

¹⁹ Soloveitchik, *On Repentance*, 119.

²⁰ Koren Mesorat HaRav *Siddur*, 165.