

Change Requires Acknowledgment

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Most of the questions I get around Yom Kippur are about apologies. What if you genuinely feel that an apology at this time will only make it worse? What if you have tried to apologize and have been turned away? How many times do you have to keep trying until it is no longer your fault? Can you apologize to someone who is no longer living? What about the apologies that are due to you? Can you demand an apology?

Certainly apologies are complicated. We have seen celebrity apologies that were so lame as to be useless. Perhaps you have heard an apology so toxic that it constitutes a new sin in itself. But apologies are not the beginning of the process. Repentance requires several preliminary steps before apology, and these are perhaps even more difficult. The first step is self-awareness and acknowledgment, and it is often the most challenging. But until we can say to ourselves, This is what I did and this is why it is wrong, we can't move toward these later stages of remorse, apology, and reconciliation.

It is a truism today that if you want to change something, you first have to create some kind of metric so that you can count it, thus becoming more aware.

That's the basis of diet and exercise apps, of the various wrist bands that count our steps or monitor our sleep or our heart beats. This is true at home as well as at work: We establish a goal that will be measurable so that we will know that we have succeeded.

When we come to the High Holy Days and find it having little effect, it is often because the task, judging oneself, seems vague and amorphous. Though the High Holy Days have been shaped through the centuries in various ways to help us do this work, what we seem to need today is something more like our electronic toys, to ping and light up and force us into awareness—acknowledgment of what we have done.

The confessions of sin, repeated ten times over Yom Kippur in the traditional service, are meant to be that wake-up call. Focused on specifics rather than generalities, they are meant to force our awareness. The *Al Chet* confession lists 54 different categories of sin, and the *Ashamnu*, a wrong-doing for every letter of the alphabet. The detail is purposeful.

The rabbis were aware that our minds work in such a way that we attempt to avoid responsibility. Often this is not even conscious. Our minds create stories to excuse our own behavior as we try to ignore aspects of our lives that don't fit with our picture of ourselves. That's the theory behind the 360-degree review, how something that is obvious to everyone else may still be invisible to us. Behavioral economists talk about our being "bias blind," by which they mean "the tendency to see clearly that other people's behavior isn't optimal, while remaining oblivious to our own shortcomings."

Think of the most famous story of sin and repentance in the Bible, the story of King David and Batsheva, Uriah's wife. The prophet Nathan confronts the King with a parable, a story about a rich farmer who has many flocks of sheep and goats. Yet when guests come for dinner he takes his poor neighbor's only lamb, the one that is precious to him like a pet, and slaughters it for the meal.

We, the readers of the Bible, know who Nathan is talking about; even if we are not Biblical scholars, it's obvious. David has stolen another man's wife, then sent him off with instructions that he be put on the front lines to be killed. Yet at first David does not recognize himself in the story, but rises up in rage at the rich farmer, until Nathan responds, "You are that man."

Jonathan Haidt, author of *The Righteous Mind*, compares our intellectual processes to a presidential press secretary. The president's press secretary, historically and today, acts to defend the president whatever he has done. Our minds act in a similar manner to put a positive spin on our own actions. They provide a story, after the fact, to explain, or to explain away any wrong-doing. Who knew that Sarah Huckabee Sanders lives inside each one of us?

Haidt tells a story from his personal life, about a time when his wife caught him leaving behind a messy kitchen counter. He immediately came to his own defense, explaining that this was only because he couldn't clean up while managing the baby and the dog. His wife accepted that explanation and he was off the hook. Afterward though, thinking about it, he realized that this was a rationalization, an after-the-fact defense. In reality he hadn't thought about the counter and could have cleaned up without endangering either of his charges. Might we be guilty of similar cover-ups, so successfully defensive that we ourselves don't realize what we have done?

Rabbi Eliezer Diamond explains that the Hebrew word that we usually translate as confession, *viddui*, is actually closer to the concept of acknowledging. Think about it. A generalized confession is meaningless. Yes, we have done wrong, but what is it exactly that we recognize that we did? The many verses of the original *Al Chet*

gave it the opportunity to touch on specifics; it was meant to focus our memories on things we might have preferred to forget or might have reinterpreted to ourselves. In a lesson on the *viddui*, Rabbi Eliezer Diamond recalled his own use of slugs in pay phones back in the day. That was getting even with the phone company, Ma Bell, for all they did wrong, their enormous size, their wealth, their terrible service. He never thought of it as what it really was: a form of theft. His choosing such a trivial and distant wrong-doing reflects how difficult it is for us to acknowledge our own failures. This was hardly a great expense and was a long time ago. Our minds help us obscure much larger and more recent faults in a very effective manner.

Forcing ourselves to call things what they are is the first step in allowing ourselves to evaluate our own actions and to decide if we really feel they are justified.

Along with the traditional listing of sins by categories, purposeful or inadvertent, by speech or by deed, hiding in the many, many pages of our new prayer book are some very modern lists hopefully eliciting the reaction, "I resemble that remark." They ask us: Are we ever distracted by our screens and thus fail to pay attention to our child or spouse beside us? Do we reach out to talk to an aging parent or a friend who is ill, but then fail to be fully present as they respond to us? Do we allow ourselves to misremember who started an argument, or exactly what our opponents have said? I have caught myself in this recently, and was totally sure and painfully wrong. When we give tzedakah, do we give to the level our tradition demands, not less than 5% of our assets, or more than 20%, or more contemporarily, if you are an economist, do we give to the point that one dollar in our pocket has the same value as one dollar has to the recipient? Does that extra

dollar sitting in my pocket or my bank account mean as much to me as it might to a child in the developing world, or a homeless family in our community? Think about that and you may be glad that the rabbis provide an alternative way of fulfilling one's obligation.

The psychological burden of facing one's wrong-doing is heavy, and so our tradition provides us with one further crutch, the use of the first person plural: **We** have sinned, **we** have transgressed. I was taught that this was to avoid embarrassment so no one would be singled out and to remind us that in transgressing we are only human like everyone else around us, but I think it was also to help prevent denial. After all, if everyone else has done all these terrible things, can it really be that I have done nothing wrong at all?

Our minds trick us into thinking we are better than we are and help us avoid awareness of our own inconsistencies. But our minds can also help us move in positive directions. Because we like to look good to ourselves and to others, making positive commitments can help motivate us. We don't want to appear hypocritical and so will exert ourselves to do the right thing. Companions who share our efforts help, as do small reminders and nudges. The Musarists would choose one aspect of their character to focus on each week and at the end of the day would tally up their successes and failures—just writing it down without any further consequence made a big difference. Knowing that we have a tendency to see only that which is self-justifying can create an awareness that other points of view exist, and we can look to others for the feedback that will help.

Understanding the natural workings of our mind, I hope that we can push ourselves to be a little more honest and a little less defensive this year.

Successfully meeting the first challenge of *viddui*, the acknowledgment of where we have fallen short, will allow us to advance through the holiday to remorse, apology, and reconciliation. We will leave the sanctuary, 25 hours later, not burdened by guilt, but renewed for a good new year.

Hashiveinu—Cause us to return O God and surely we will return. Renew our days as in the past.