

Teshuvah and Viduy Workshop for Yom Kippur

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Overview

The Yom Kippur prayer services provide a framework for working towards the goals of the day: introspection, repentance, and the personal growth known as teshuvah. This workshop provides insight into the mitzvot of teshuvah and viduy in order to help make our prayers and Yom Kippur itself more meaningful and effective. You may also consider reading through the Viduy explanations in the ArtScroll Yom Kippur Machzor pp. 849 - 869.

Atonement, *kaparah*, on Yom Kippur comes about by engaging in teshuvah, and by observing the five restrictions of Yom Kippur: no eating, drinking, libations, wearing leather shoes or marital relations. Please refer further to the Morasha classes on Teshuvah and Yom Kippur.

Section I. What is Teshuvah?

God created each individual with unique attributes and talents, and the ability to exercise free will in order to reach his potential. During the year we may make mistakes and misuse our free will, thereby undermining our ability to reach our potential. God therefore gave us the precious gift of teshuvah, enabling us to correct our mistakes, regain our lost potential, and repair our relationships with others and with Him.

Although one can do teshuvah any day of the year, God has set aside the ten days from Rosh HaShanah to Yom Kippur inclusively as the special Ten Days of Teshuvah (Rosh HaShanah 18a). And it is on Yom Kippur that God accepts our teshuvah and grants us forgiveness, cleansing the slate of our past mistakes.

1. Rabbi Shimon Apisdorf, Rosh HaShanah Yom Kippur Survival Kit, Leviathan Press, p. 102 – Yom Kippur is a day for dealing with our mistakes.

One of the most common words in your prayer book is “sin.” It’s not a very pleasant sounding word. Certainly no one wants to look at himself or herself as a sinner. In Hebrew, the generic term for sin is *chet*. This term literally means “to make a mistake.” Sins, no thanks. But mistakes – sure – we all make mistakes.

The issue on Yom Kippur (and throughout the year) is this: How do we correct the mistakes of our past and avoid repeating them in the future? If we can understand this, then we possess the key to unlocking an enormous reservoir of latent potential for greatness that would otherwise lie dormant.

This is teshuvah. The common translation of teshuvah is “repentance.” Again, a rather foreign sounding idea. The proper translation of the word teshuvah is “to return.” Teshuvah is an animated technique for locating the rationalizations that lie at the root of our mistakes: recognizing them, dealing with them, and eliminating them.

2. Siddur, Morning Prayer; Rabbi Mordechai Becher, Gateway to Judaism, p. 136 – Teshuvah is a return to the purity of one’s soul.

אלוקי נשמה שנתת בי טהורה היא, אתה בראתה, אתה יצרתה, אתה נפתחתה בי ...

My God, the soul you have given me is pure. You created it, You formed it, You breathed it into me ...

Teshuvah, literally translated, means “return.” We believe that the soul is intrinsically pure and began its sojourn in this world in a state of purity. Mistakes and wrongdoings are departures from the essential nature of the human soul. Therefore, when a person has done something wrong, the process of teshuvah is really that of going back to his or her true essence.

3. Rambam (Maimonides), Hilchot Teshuvah 2:7 – Yom Kippur is an auspicious time for teshuvah, and therefore we confess numerous times on this day!

Yom Kippur is an auspicious time for teshuvah for everyone – for individuals and for the community as a whole...Therefore, everyone is obligated to do teshuvah and to confess on Yom Kippur...the first confession is said in the afternoon service (Minchah) before the pre-Yom Kippur meal; then again in the evening service (Maariv); again in the morning service (Shacharit); and in the additional service (Mussaf); in the afternoon service; and the closing service (Neilah).

A Story about Teshuvah

4. Rabbi Label Lam, “Our Ticket to the Hall of Fame,” from www.torah.org – Although we spend a lot of time on Yom Kippur examining our mistakes and faults, this is not all negative, because such recognition can serve as a catalyst to real change.

Many years ago I was waiting in a mid-town reception area to learn with a businessman, and he was somewhat behind schedule. I made the mistake of peeking out from behind the book I was learning, and I espied a Sports Illustrated on the magazine rack. There on the cover was no picture of a robust athlete but rather the shrunken and prune-like countenance of someone I almost recognized. I looked closer, and lo and behold it was none other than Mickey Mantle.

I wondered what in the world he was doing on the front cover of a current Sports Illustrated. He had not done anything nearly athletic for decades. I became curious to read the article. “The Mick,” as he was affectionately known, had been my childhood hero! I was there at the stadium the day he hit his 500th homerun.

My jaw dropped as I read with rapture a story about and by Mickey himself, but it had little or nothing to do with baseball. Rather he systematically spelled out in that public format dozens of his personal failings. He spoke about how his drinking had interfered with his playing baseball and how some days he showed up at the park drunk. He spoke openly about how his drinking problem had paved the way for his son’s addictive lifestyle which brought him to an early grave from a drug overdose. He listed and vividly portrayed a wide array of ill behaviors and their attending consequences including his own deteriorating liver condition that could be traced to his abuse of alcohol.

I was shocked to see such a public admission. It took a lot of guts to open up like that. He acknowledged that he was doing so to warn others and dissuade them from making the same mistakes he was guilty of. What came next really landed a blow and brought real tears to eyes. He wrote in conclusion that he realized that he had disappointed and hurt his family, his friends, and his fans “and now Mickey Mantle is going to hit more homeruns than ever before!” The gentleman I came to meet and learn with stepped out, and I had to explain to him why I was reading Sports Illustrated and weeping.

We can never know what another person’s motive is, whether or not it springs from love of the Almighty or fear or whatever. What we can appreciate is that when one recognizes how deep they have sunken and that depth becomes the impetus to go higher than ever, then the lowness is recalibrated as a means to get even higher. If a bow is pulled down so that it goes far from the high place to which it is aimed and then it is suddenly released, the tension created by the opposite pull propels the arrow even farther. The same applies if a person digs a deep hole and then they realize that they are going in the wrong direction. That hole can be used as a foundation for a tall building; the deeper the pit, the higher the building might go. All can yet be turned around.

Taking advantage of the amazing teshuvah opportunity on Yom Kippur day, or any time the heart becomes painfully aware, may be our ticket to the hall of fame.

Section II. The Teshuvah Process

What are the steps of teshuvah?

1. Rambam, Hilchot Teshuvah (Laws of Repentance), 2:2, 9 – The components of teshuvah: regret, cessation, confession, resolution, and if necessary, asking forgiveness from others.

How does one do teshuvah?

- The transgressor stops doing the transgression and removes it from his thoughts.
- He resolves that he will not do it again in the future...
- He regrets [what he did] in the past...
- He verbally expresses his wrongdoings to God and makes a verbal resolution for the future.

Regarding wrongdoings against one's fellow man: one must reimburse whatever he owes him, and ask the other person's forgiveness.

Section III. Viduy (or alt. Vidui) – Articulating our Transgressions

Viduy, confession, is an integral element of the teshuvah process, as mentioned above. As such, it occupies a prominent place in the Yom Kippur service. We say it each of the five times we pray the Shemoneh Esrei on Yom Kippur, both in the individual Shemoneh Esrei (at the end) and in the repetition of each Shemoneh Esrei (in the middle) by the *chazzan* (cantor). It is also recited in the individual Shemoneh Esrei during Minchah before Yom Kippur, for a total of eleven times.

1. Rabbi Eliyahu Kitov, The Book of Our Heritage, Vol. I, p. 85 – Confession is only meaningful after a decision to abandon the transgression.

The oral confession is a principal part of teshuvah, as the verse (Bamidbar/Numbers 5:7) states: *And you shall confess your transgression*, and (Mishlei/Proverbs 28:13): *He who admits [sinning] and abandons [it] will have mercy shown to him*. During such confession, one is obligated to specify the sin transgressed as did Moshe Rabbenu (Moses our teacher) in his prayer (Shemot/Exodus 32:31): *This people has indeed committed a great sin and has made a golden idol*. Confession is thus an integral part of the teshuvah process, which is the essence of Yom Kippur.

Confession is only meaningful, however, if one has decided to abandon sin, for were

one to confess without having made such a decision, he would be like one whom our Sages described as immersing in a mikveh to purify himself while holding an impure object in his hand – the immersion obviously cannot be effective until one discards the impure object. For this reason, the confessional prayers on Yom Kippur are repeated numerous times, for if they were ineffective at one time – because the person had not yet decided to abandon his transgressions – the later confession might be effective.

Verbalizing Viduy

2. Sefer HaChinuch, Mitzvah 364 – Two benefits of verbalization: It expresses recognition that God notices our behavior, and it builds resolve not to repeat our transgressions.

By verbalizing our admission of our sins, we are expressing our conviction that all human behavior is revealed before God. No sin, no matter how small it may seem to us, is an inconsequential matter; God sees and takes into account every one of our deeds.

In addition, the soul-searching process that we undergo through our *viduy*, when we specify each sin and express our remorse over the fact that we have committed it, will in itself strengthen us and prevent us from repeating it.

Striking the Chest

3. Rabbi Yitzchak Sender, The Commentators' Rosh Hashanah, p. 90 – The custom of striking one's chest during Viduy is a recognition that sin is rooted in the desire to transgress.

The custom during the recitation of Viduy is to strike one's chest over the heart at each mention of wrongdoing. One reason for this custom is based on our Sages' description of the chronological order of sin: "First the eyes see, then the heart desires, and then the sin is committed." Thus, since responsibility for sin is attributed in large part to the inflamed passions of the heart, therefore the process of teshuvah involves using the hand to strike the heart.

"But Rabbi, I didn't do that one!"

4. Rabbi Eliyahu Kitov, The Book of Our Heritage, Vol. I, pp. 86-87 – We all need to recite the entire Viduy, because (a) we are responsible for each other, and (b) there are many nuances in each transgression.

One must recite the entire order of confession, even if he knows that he is not guilty of one or more of the sins delineated. All Israel are held responsible for each other. As our Sages taught: The verse (Vayikra/Leviticus 26:37) states: *And they shall stumble one into the other* - i.e., one shall stumble because of the other's sin. It is for this reason that the confessional prayer was written in plural form.

Moreover, one can never be certain that he has never been guilty of a certain transgression, for there are many levels to sin, and even if one has not violated a complete prohibition, it is possible that he has violated it partially. God alone, Who probes man's inner self, knows all his thoughts and deeds.

Stories about Forgiveness

5. From www.Rabbanan.org – Be quick to forgive others.

Two friends, Chaim and Moshe, went to the desert for a week-long expedition. After a while an argument broke out between them, with Chaim slapping Moshe on the cheek. Moshe was badly hurt but remained silent. However, he began writing in the sand: "My best friend slapped me on the cheek today..."

They continued their journey until they reached a beautiful and inviting oasis, with crystal blue water, and they decided to jump in for a swim. Moshe went first and almost immediately his foot got caught on something under water, and he began to drown. Chaim saw his friend drowning, jumped in quickly and saved him.

After Moshe recovered from the near drowning, he carved on the stone next to him: "My best friend saved my life today."

Chaim asked Moshe for an explanation. After I slapped you on the cheek you wrote in the sand, and now after I save you, you write on a stone. Why?

Moshe replied that when someone hurts us we should write it in the sand, where winds of forgiveness can easily erase it away...But when someone does something good for us, we have to carve it in stone so no wind can ever erase it.

6. Maasiyot HaZohar Vol. I, Miketz – The Power of Forgiveness: A Zohar Legend

Rabbi Abba (the scribe of the Zohar) once sat at the gateway to the Town of Lud.

He saw a traveler sit down on a pile of rocks at the edge of a mountain overlooking a cliff. The man was exhausted from his journey and immediately fell asleep. R. Abba watched this innocuous scene for a bit, until, to his dismay, he watched as a deadly snake slithered out of the rocks making its way towards the sleeping man.

[R. Abba, who for some reason was immobilized and transfixed by this unfolding drama,] suddenly watched as a new turn of events happened. A giant lizard jumped out between the rocks and killed the snake.

R. Abba continued watching and saw that the man stood up and was perplexed to see a beheaded snake lying in front of him. He quickly gathered his possessions and rose to continue his journey. At that instant the pile of rocks he was sitting on collapsed and fell into the ravine below.

The man was about to wander off when R. Abba ran after him and recounted everything he had witnessed. R. Abba asked the man, “My friend, to what do you attribute all these miracles that just transpired?”

The traveler at first did not want to be bothered but felt the sincerity of R. Abba’s question and confided in him.

“Throughout my life, I have always forgiven and made up with anyone who wronged me. Never have I gone to sleep without forgiving someone for hurting me in any way. Anyone who would hurt me, I would endeavor, with all my heart, to resolve whatever animosity was between us. And lastly, I would turn the hateful situation [around] and do acts of kindness for the person involved in the misunderstanding.”

When R. Abba heard this, he burst into tears. This person’s actions are great... he forgives anyone and everyone who has harmed him. It is no surprise that God performs miracles on a daily basis for this blessed man.

Discussion Questions about Confession

7. Aish UK – Viduy/Confession – Is it all about guilt and sin?

Much of our religious vocabulary is derived from other cultures – sin, repentance, confession, etc. The English language is rich with a cultural iconography that spans centuries of religious experience, but its terms are inappropriate for capturing Jewish ideas. Jewish thought has never embraced the idea that man is “guilty,” fundamentally sinful, or bad. Even the word “sin” is not an accurate translation of “*chet*,” which means “missing the target.” Our target is Good, because each of us is made “in the image of God.” Godliness is at the core of our being. Doing what’s right is so fulfilling, because it expresses our deepest desires.

Confusion, impulse, and arrogance all lead us off track, sometimes with disastrous consequences, but they don’t make us bad. With *vidui*, we regret what we’ve done. Not who we are.

Tell a child they’re bad, and we lower their self-esteem and motivation. Tell them they’re good, that a certain behavior is not for them, and they can feel empowered to grow and improve.

“*Teshuvah*” does not mean “repentance” as much as it means to “return.” To do good, to be Godly, is simply to get back to being who we really are.

Vidui begins the process of shedding those actions that are not for us. We strike our chests as if to say, “It’s my bodily impulses, not my inner being.” It expresses God’s empowering belief in the goodness of Man. And our knowledge that we are great enough to do better.

8. Aish UK – Why say the Viduy again and again?

Actually, we probably don't say it enough! That might sound odd – after all, we repeat the same list of mistakes 10 times in 25 hours...

But is one day enough to examine an entire year? Is one week?

Like everything else in life, the more we do something, the better we become at it. A musician's masterful creativity can only come from hours of repeatedly following an expert formula.

The *vidui* is our expert formula, covering every possible angle of human failure and shortcoming.

The first time we read the *vidui*, it is "someone else's list." Maybe a few categories here and there have some relevance to us. Hopefully, each time we look at the list, our recall can be more expansive, bringing into focus new areas of weakness and new pathways for growth. The *vidui* formula focuses not so much on specific acts as on root causes.

We speak of problems resulting from general carelessness, physical temptation, speaking without thinking, and so on. We may recall a time we shouted at a colleague, an occasion we said something hurtful, and we begin to identify a pattern. As more acts emerge under a single heading, we start gaining insight into possible areas of growth.

No two musicians will play the same piece in exactly the same way, and no two people will experience the *vidui* in the same way. Each *vidui* we recite should enrich our inner score, helping us clarify and illuminate our own personal symphony for the new year ahead.

Preparing to Recite Viduy

9. Read through and discuss the Viduy prayers.

Consider reading and discussing the Viduy with commentaries and questions for thought found in the ArtScroll Yom Kippur Machzor pp. 849 - 869, as well as in the OU Israel Center Vidui Booklet and Aish.com's Exploring the Al-Chet Prayer (on nleresources.com)