

## Lev Chadash: A New Heart

Of the many beautiful and powerful prayers that we will engage in today, I am most drawn to the Vidui, the Confessional prayers. We all know them: the *Ashamnu* and the *Al Het*, when we pound our breasts, and confess our sins. Both are alphabetical acrostics, that is, they each begins with *Aleph*, and ends with *Taf*, cataloging a moral failing for every letter of the Hebrew alphabet, from the first letter, through the last.

Rather than providing a literal translation of *Ashamnu*, the editors of our *Mahzor* give us a parallel English acrostic, enumerating the range of possible sins from A-Z. For in this case, the form, rather than the specific content, really is the message: There is nothing in our vocabulary of which a human being is not capable. And, there is no covering any of them up, no self – deception or obfuscation will do: Today, we call ourselves to account for all of them, and we make no effort to sidestep, either out of embarrassment or shame, a single one from the list. With words, we lay all of our shortcomings, our missteps and failings before God.

I am drawn to these prayers because they are more than words on a page; through them, we enact a bit of sacred theatre, not as spectators, but as participants. We sing them, antiphonally or responsively, in a back and forth between us and the Hazzan, and before God. Even more, what draws me to them is that they are consciously embodied prayers. We use more than just our voices. We stand, even as the day grows longer and we become increasingly aware of the physical toll that the fast is taking on us. And, we use our arms and hands, folding our fingers into a fist, gently beating our chests in gesture of contrition.

And not just once: By the time the gates of Neilah close tomorrow night, we will have gone through this confession and recounting of sins 10 times, if you include both our silent and our communal renditions. One might ask why we put ourselves through this. The answer is simple. We do it because we believe that through prayer, *heshbon hanefesh*- soul searching, and a humbling, reorientation of our ego, we can change. We can be different.

And yet, truth is, you and I have done this many times before, year in and year out. God willing, we will be here again next Yom Kippur as well. So I ask you: Does it work? Do we, can we, really change?

To take an extreme example that was in the news this summer, consider the case of Ray Rice. Can a man who beats his wife, be capable of change? The video of Rice assaulting his fiancée in an elevator was shocking. It raised a much needed discussion about domestic violence, misogyny, and a culture that turns a blind eye to the transgressions of athletic stars. But it also raised a broader question: how do we know that he will not do it again? Can a violent abuser change?

A study funded by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, back in 2004, concluded that yes, domestic abusers could reform. If they enrolled in treatment programs, and stayed the course, they could change. The study followed 618 men and their partners. At the 40 month follow-up, 90% of the men had not assaulted their partner in the previous year.

The study concluded that the odds for successful change go up when these factors are present:

- They felt remorse for harming their partner.
- They took full responsibility for their actions and didn't blame their partner.
- They were motivated to change their values and be a different, better person.

- They were willing to reflect upon the effect abuse in their childhood had on them

A professional in this field explained, “What I look for in that first moment is the degree of real remorse, and how much responsibility he takes for 100% of what he did. And the main factor that determines whether a man is going to change is whether he sticks to the program.”

If these criteria for change sound familiar, they should. Almost 1000 years before AA and twelve step programs entered our culture, Maimonides outlined the Jewish path towards change in his *Hilchot Teshuvah*, the Laws of Repentance:

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 [that which 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 fellowman: one must make restitution and ask the other person’s forgiveness.

Regret, resolve, verbal confession, restitution and asking for forgiveness. That’s the program. But the problem is both sticking to the program, and choosing to undertake it in the first place. That same study of domestic abusers also showed that men who enroll in such programs comprise only a fraction of abusers, and even then, most of them were forced to enroll by court order. Here’s an interesting number: 25% of abusive men never feel guilt for what they have done. An even larger percentage feel guilty, but never take full responsibility, clinging to the notion that their partner is at least partly to blame, that it can’t be completely their fault.

Change is hard, because, bottom line, it is difficult to see ourselves as others see us. The story we tell ourselves about ourselves is the story that we can live with. So we cling to it, even

when our actions and attitudes reveal a different narrative. Making excuses to mitigate or justify our behavior becomes a reflex; we are complicit in our own blindness to the truth.

I remember reading once about a sign that was placed in the window of a book store. The top line read: *Jesus doesn't work*. Underneath that it said: *Judaism doesn't work*. Below that, it read: *Islam doesn't work*. Underneath that it read: *Christian Science doesn't work...Scientology doesn't work....* And finally on the bottom line in bold letters, were the words, **YOU WORK!**

Yes, there is a program here, but we have to work the program.

My colleague David Wolpe commented that the fact that *Ashamnu* and *Al Het* are written in the plural can actually support our desire to duck the truth. We tell ourselves: ‘well, we use the plural, “*we* abuse, *we* betray, *we* are cruel...,” because we are a community, and because we stand together and take responsibility for each other. But, really, I haven’t done most of the things on that list. Maybe somebody else in Temple Israel did those things, or maybe somebody in another synagogue in Metrowest is guilty of that. But that’s not me. And so compared to them, I’m not so bad.’”

So let me remind you that the real intention of *Ashamnu* and *Al Het* is to use it as a mirror: to judge ourselves by the standard of our own situation and capabilities, and not against other people whose transgressions may be greater than our own. Because, when the day comes that we stand before the heavenly court, we won’t be asked, “were you better than that wife beater or that embezzler who made the newspaper.” We will be asked, did you live up to your capabilities, surmount your challenges, attempt to achieve whatever it was that life demanded of you?

I think that, with each *al het*, with each gentle pounding of the breast, the questions to ask ourselves are: “*in what way did I betray, to what degree am I capable of killing through indifference, how do I destroy through my speech, both knowingly and unknowingly?*” Rabbi Irving Greenberg puts it this way: Rather than denying our identification with this catalog of human failings, we can use them as an indicator of our spiritual health. He says that the more sins we can recognize as our own and say, “yes, I am capable of that, yes, I did do that, then the more religiously and ethically alive we know we are.

And yet, Rabbi Greenberg continues, “...*I began to see that by (only) focusing on my misdeeds, I was missing a deeper truth in Judaism. The greater issue was not just turning from sin, but rather becoming a full human being. The focus on wrongdoing allowed me to overlook all the standard good actions, the routinized daily behaviors which fell short of what I could and should be doing. The issue was not just misdeeds, therefore, but mediocrity. Could I change? Could I grow? The Days of Awe challenged me to reshape myself, to improve relationships, to become a more vital person.*

Our tradition talks a lot about *Teshuvah*- which literally means “return”- in this way: *Teshuvah* that is motivated not by our failings, but by our possibilities, not out of fear, but out of love. Not out of guilt, but out of insight; an intuition that wholeness in our lives is always possible. “Great is *teshuvah*,” writes Maimonides, because it draws a person closer to God’s presence.... *Teshuvah* brings close,” he says, “those who are far off.” We feel tonight that we are far off, and that we want to return home.

This kind of *Teshuvah* is literally a homecoming, a return to one’s true self as we were meant to be, even if what we are becoming is completely new. And in a sense, we are always in a process of renewal.

People say that, at the rate that the cells of our body die and are replaced, we are virtually a new person every seven years. Actually, that's an urban legend. The truth is that some organs of our body replace their cells at faster rates than others, from seven to ten years, while parts of our brain and our hearts either lose only a small percentage of cells through the course of our life, or none at all. I like the idea that as our body grows and changes, a piece of our minds and hearts, the best pieces of our selves, remain constant from the beginning of life until its end. It is the nature of the unencumbered heart to be loving and generous. *Teshuvah* is the process of return, our way back to the open and generous heart.

People really are capable of dramatic changes. Think of a person who converts to Judaism. It is very common for Jews by Choice to describe their journey as a coming home, even though pieces of the journey are new, and still unfolding. For many of those whose stories I have had the privilege to hear, their point of departure was neither guilt nor remorse; it was the sometimes sudden and simple insight that change was possible, that their lives could be different. For many, it was an affirmation that what they perceived as a spiritual hole in their lives could be filled. For some, it was knowing that they were capable of travelling a great journey in order to build a life with the person they loved. In any case, it was the inner realization that our lives can change. And that is true for all of us.

The story of Mosab Hassan Yousef is a dramatic story of personal transformation. He grew up on the West Bank, the oldest son of one of the founders of Hamas. As a child, he threw stones at Israeli cars, and was picked up by the police for attempting to illegally buy guns. He was destined for a life in and out of Israeli prisons, or worse. Yet, as the group that his father helped found morphed into a terrorist organization, Mosab secretly changed his life. For ten years, between 1996 and 2006, Mosab worked as an agent for the Shin Bet, Israel's intelligence

agency. His code name was the Green Prince. He was responsible for saving hundreds of Israeli lives by helping the Shin Bet locate mastermind bomb-makers, suicide bombers, and phantom sources of terrorist funding. He wrote a book about his experiences, which has just recently been made into a movie.

When I went to hear him speak, I didn't know what to expect- some kind of misfit, I was sure. What kind of person, having been brought up in that environment, a strictly religious Muslim community that eventually saw Jihad as a religious obligation to destroy Israel, ends up working for the Shin Bet? What I found was a person who still loved his family and his community deeply, but who saw that the killing of innocent civilians was wrong, and who decided to do something to stop the madness. What I heard was a person who was unafraid to question everything about his life, and who could see that it all could be very different than the life he had been leading.

Today, living in a small town in the Midwestern United States, he tries to keep a low profile. He used to tell people he was an organic farmer, looking for a job. But one day, somebody recognized him from his book. "Hey- you're not a farmer," he said to Mosab. To which Mosab answered, "Sure I am. I am a farmer of ideas."

If there are people like Mosab Hassan Yousef in the world, who are unafraid to reinvent themselves, let alone face physical danger every day for years, in order to be true to themselves, then who am I to doubt my own ability to renew, and to return to my best self?

In one of my favorite Chassidic texts, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev pictures the process of returning to be at the very core of our lives. He translates the concluding line of psalm 150, "*Kol Hanesama Tehalel Yah,*" as, "*with each and every breath we have to praise God:*" Which he explains to mean: With every breath we take, we are actually a completely new

creation, because each moment that the life-force seeks to escape the body, God doesn't let it, and sends us another in-breath. And so every breath we take is a moment of *teshuvah*, a return to life, and to the possibility of seeing ourselves as a new creation!

Rabbi Levi Yitzchak urges that, if we don't grasp that, if we don't really believe that we are made new in each moment, then none of our acts of *teshuvah*, our attempts to change our behaviors, can't possibly be effective. Because we need to believe that we are not slaves to habit, that change is possible, and that God wants us to return to the home of our best selves.

Another Chassidic teaching is that *Teshuvah*, repentance, can happen in an instant. In an instant! Which doesn't mean, I think, that we still don't have to work the program, confess, make amends, etc., if that is what is required. But what it does mean is that change begins with an insight into what is possible. And that insight comes the moment that our hearts are open to that possibility.

Now, let me ask you to gauge your emotional reaction to two words. I want you to examine for yourselves how each word makes you feel. The first word is guilt...feel what guilt feels like in the body....see if there is a change in your heart rate, for example, or in what part of your body you may feel sensation.... Ok.... The second word is remorse...explore for a moment what remorse triggers in you...So now, what was the difference for you in the emotional valence of these two words?

Let me surmise, at least from my own experience, what you might have felt. Yom Kippur is about acknowledging and taking responsibility for our failings. That's good. However, guilt, as an *emotion*, is constricting. We may feel a shortness of breath, or a contraction in the body. It shuts us down. It closes the heart.



Remorse, however, is different. It is less constricting. It implies an ability to accept the truth about ourselves with compassion. We regret, but we don't have to beat ourselves up. We know that, given the imperfect, messy, and frail nature of our humanity, if we could have done better, surely, we would have done better. Our remorse may trigger sadness.. or regret...but we can still breathe slowly and fully, and most important, we sense an opening of the heart. *That's* the place where change begins.

What are we really doing when beat our chests? First, if we make contact with just enough pressure, we wake ourselves up if we are tired, or if our minds had drifted from the present moment. With another gentle pounding or two, we become aware of the beating of our hearts.

In the prophet Ezekiel's words: *V'natati lachem lev chadash, v'ruach chadasha eten b'kirbechem. And I will give you a new heart, and put a new spirit in you.*

This gentle pounding of the fist, my friends, is the Jewish defibrillator. It awakens us to the heart's unfailing rhythm, and we reacquaint ourselves with the place in our bodies where emotion is felt strongly.

*V'hasiroti et lev ha'even mi'b'sarchem, v'nantati l'echem lev basar. <sup>i</sup>And I will remove the heart of stone from your body, and give you a heart of flesh.*

As we progress through the day, we feel the accumulated layers of anger and disappointment that have formed a hard shell around the heart, gently falling away. And the heart reveals itself to be as it was in the beginning: loving, generous, courageous and kind.

Be careful not to beat our breasts too harshly. During this day of *heshbon hanefesh*- of soul searching, we need to have compassion on ourselves, to accept ourselves, with all our weaknesses, with love. Because, truly, if we could have done better this year, we would have

been better. And, if we find that we are pounding too hard, we can uncurl our fingers and meet our heart with a caressing hand. Let us make that a practice today, to move, at least figuratively, from the clenched fist, to the caressing touch of the heart.

*V'ruchi eten B'kirbechem v'asiti et asher b'chukai teileichu, u'mishpatai tishm'ru...And I will put my spirit into you, and you **will** follow my laws and faithfully observe....* The open heart will lead us to act with renewed energy and ease.

*Then you shall dwell in the land which I gave to your fathers, and you shall be my people, and I will be your God.*

On this Day of Atonement, may we be blessed with compassion.

May we be blessed with an unencumbered heart.

May we return to our ancestral land- the land of our soul.

And May we find our way back to God.

Amen

