

Reflections on Sin

When I told my husband that I would be speaking about sin on Kol Nidrei, he turned to me with a serious expression on his face and asked: “Are you going to speak *for* or *against* it? I was looking for guidance and instead, I got humor.

His response actually reminded me of a joke about a rabbi who is giving a lecture on repentance. She begins by asking the class a question: “What must we do before we can expect forgiveness from sin? After a long silence one of the students raises his hand and with a mischievous look says: “Sin?”

While confessing our sins is at the core of the Yom Kippur service, I have come to realize that “sin” is a word that bothers many of us. So, I wonder: How might we understand our confessions of sin? Can we reclaim the word sin so that it feels meaningful rather than alienating?

When I was at the Conference of Reform Judaism this past December -at a session introducing the new High Holyday prayer book, several attendees questioned why the word sin hadn't been eliminated - *scratched* out from the prayer book. The new prayer book does use alternative wording -like “for the wrong that we have done” but the word “sin” is still there. And for some reason, it makes many of us uncomfortable.

Maybe “sin talk” feels foreign to us because we associate it with “original sin” - with the idea that we are born in a sinful state, which is *not* a Jewish concept. Or perhaps the discomfort comes from the connection we make between sin and divine law? To speak of sin is to invoke a God whose will has been violated. And so, at a minimum it requires being willing to engage with a moral framework that is not of our own making. It requires that we confront Torah passages that offend us and that we grapple with the ways in which the rabbis of *our* time, have reinterpreted these passages.

And not only that: this framework of divine law involves linking *sin with punishment*. The Torah details the various curses that befall those who sin and the blessings bestowed upon those who follow God's teachings. But this notion of reward and punishment rubs many of us the wrong way since we know the world doesn't operate quite this way. What we might not know, however, is that the rabbis of the Talmud were also uncomfortable with this calculus of reward and punishment and came to see righteousness as its own reward and wickedness as its own punishment.

Adding to the discomfort of the *word* “sin” is the uneasiness of the *act* of public confession of our sins. Yet public confession is at the heart of the work that lies ahead of us on this most sacred day of the Jewish year.

While our daily prayers begin with the words *elohai neshama shenatata bi tehora hi*; my God, the soul you have given me is pure, the rabbis speak of an evil inclination within us which, at times wins over our good inclination, and leads us to sin. There is a fascinating story in the Talmud about the *yetzer ha ra* - this evil inclination. The story provides a nuanced understanding of the role it plays in our lives.

We are told that one day, the people cry out to God because they want God to take back the evil inclination.... What does God do? God surrenders the evil inclination to the people and as they are about to destroy it, the evil inclination warns them by saying: "realize that if you kill me, the world is finished."

Unsure of what this means, the people decide to hold the evil inclination hostage for three days. And during these three days when the evil inclination is in captivity no one builds a house, takes a wife, gives birth or engages in commerce.

In the story, the evil inclination is conceived of as desire and ambition, which -if not reigned in – leads to chaos and destruction. But, if channeled properly this same evil inclination gives birth to life and can spur creativity and productivity. Of course, channeling this evil inclination towards something positive requires being able to reflect on our behavior and the ways in which we might have fallen short.

It occurred to me that a modern way of talking about this process of reflection is to call it a "*selfie of the soul*." I am sure you are familiar with the fad with "selfies" right? Those pictures we take of ourselves with our Smart phones to mark really interesting and important moments like: having brunch or a night out at the movies or even sitting in traffic. But calling our confessions a "selfie of the soul" shifts the focus from the more mundane pictures we like to take of ourselves to, what I would call, an "internal snapshot." A "selfie of the soul" is not about puffing ourselves up to show our *best* selves to the world. It's about peeling away at the layers, at the masks, that keep us from seeing ourselves as we truly are.

It might even be more appropriate to call the *Al Chet* an "us-ee" - a term I recently learned. The "us-ee" is when the person taking the picture includes not only herself but others - "us." Because, when we say the *Al Chet* we actually include our entire community. We use the plural form in our confession as a way of recognizing that we bear a degree of responsibility for the sins of everyone who is part of our community.

From a practical standpoint, however, if our public confession required that we *only* say those sins we are guilty of out loud, it would probably be an embarrassing proposition without much of a chance of actually being carried out!

I'd like to share with you two striking aspects about our public confession that you might not have noticed before. Isn't it interesting that our long list of confessions says nothing about ritual observance? Nothing about failing to attend Shabbat services regularly, not lighting Chanukah candles or observing Passover. There isn't one reference to *ritual* in the *Al Chet*. The liturgy speaks only of *moral failings*, like gossip, slander, or deceit. And another striking aspect of the *Al Chet* is that the moral failings we confess are not *cardinal sins* like murder, adultery or incest.

In fact, the sins listed in the *Al Chet* are *common* sins - some of them so commonplace that it takes the Yom Kippur confession to force us to become aware of them.

One such commonplace sin is the sin of bearing a grudge. I focus on this particular sin because it's one that many of us can relate to; it's a sin that rears its ugly head in so many different forms and circumstances. If, however, we hope to emerge from this Yom Kippur feeling more whole and at peace with ourselves, we would be well served to reflect on how it plays out in our own lives.

Alan Morinis, the well-known author and teacher of Mussar, the spiritual practice I spoke about on Rosh Hashanah, tells the following story about a student of his. *It's about a young man named Rob and his wife Sarah, who after several years of marriage were blessed with the birth of their first child, a boy.*

They planned a bris and invited all their friends and family to the celebration. As it happened, Rob's father didn't get along with Sarah's parents and so, when he called his father to invite him to the ceremony, Rob added: "and Dad, please make an effort to be civil to Sarah's parents."

Well, Rob's father took such offense at this comment that he did not attend the bris of his own grandson. Not only that, he stopped speaking to his son. Father and son didn't speak to each other for eighteen years.

In that time, Rob's father never met his own grandson. Every time Rob thought about forgiving his father he couldn't - the grievance seemed too unjust and not only that, Rob believed that his father was ultimately responsible for their estrangement.

And here, at this crossroads in the story, Alan Morinis describes how the practice of Mussar helped Rob move forward. Instead of thinking about forgiveness, Rob focused on the character trait of *generosity*. In the Mussar literature generosity entails stretching oneself to give beyond the boundaries of the comfortable or usual. And so, in an act of conscious generosity, a "generosity of spirit," Rob wrote a letter to his father. His father wrote back. Then, Rob decided to invite his father to celebrate his and Sarah's wedding anniversary. His father came and met his grandson for the first time. Alan Morinis concludes this story with a reflection on the practice of Mussar, which gave Rob the tools to free himself from his grudge-bearing nature and to entrust the governance of his life to his higher self, the soul, which seeks wholeness and peace.

And with this story I return to my opening remarks about our discomfort with the word *sin* and propose a new way of thinking about the sins we confess on Yom Kippur.

Focusing on the soul, which seeks wholeness and peace, Rabbi Jeff Salkin, a noted contemporary author, suggests a metaphor for sin based on a familiar gesture: the rhythmic beating of the chest during our public confession. In Talmudic times this beating of the chest was considered to be an outward expression of mourning; it was a ritual associated with death. Rabbi Salkin proposes that we *reclaim* this association between the beating of our chests and

mourning. And not only that, he proposes that during the public confession of our sins we envision *ourselves* as the person for whom we are mourning! He wants us to imagine sin as a miniature death - a death of the spirit or soul.

Rabbi Salkin suggests that we translate “al chet shechatanu” normally rendered as “for the sin we have committed” as “for the death of the spirit that comes from.....we fill in the blank. And while it might seem a bit radical to speak of sin as a miniature death experience, he reminds us that both the rituals and the Torah readings for Yom Kippur are all about *death and rebirth*.

Tomorrow we will read passages from Deuteronomy insisting that we “choose life.” And in the afternoon we will turn to Jonah, the prophet who is swallowed by a “great fish,” and then regurgitated onto dry land. *Death and rebirth*. Not only do our texts underscore this theme but we ourselves engage in a “miniature death experience” as we abstain from the things that make us feel alive, like food or bathing. And when the final shofar blast is sounded tomorrow night – a sound akin to the cry of a newborn, it would not be far-fetched to envision our own new selves being born.

Perhaps the beating on the chest is not only an act of mourning for ourselves but also a kind of spiritual CPR. And we can think of *tshuvah* as nothing less than the rebirth of our soul. We are once again alive to the possibility of a new moral life

I guess, when all is said and done, I’d have to say that I’m “*for sin*” - that is, for keeping the word sin in our liturgy. I believe we should embrace the challenge of grappling with a moral framework that is *not* of our own making and with the subsequent interpretations that comprise our tradition. Like the teaching the rabbis offered long ago -that righteousness is its own reward and wickedness its own punishment. But I am grateful for the new metaphors that help us find meaning in our prayers of confession and inspire us to do the hard work of repentance.

May we be up to this challenge and may we be blessed in the coming year with a soul that finds wholeness and peace.

Gamar hatima tova.