

Central Reform Temple

Kol Nidre 5785 – 2024

A True Apology

Yom Kippur asks us to perform the act of teshuva – repentance for things we have done wrong. Teshuva comes from the root word *shuv* – to return. To return to our best selves, the one we know we can be. We read in our service:

hashivenu adonay elekha venashuvah "Help us turn to You, and we shall return." *Hadesh yamenu kekedem* "Renew our lives as in days of old."

It calls for a better understanding of our true selves and the renewal that is possible at this season. But what is it that we are turning away from and to what are we returning? We say, *Al Het Shehatenu lefanecha* -'For the Sin we have committed against You'. Committed against You- for today that means, that conduct and character that represents who we could be but are not yet or not yet consistently. Who, in fact, God wants us to be and yet we sin by not being so.

There are three words that are mentioned in the Torah for sin, *Pesha*, *Avon*, and *Het*.

Pesha means rebellion. It refers to the attitude of mind through which a person sets themselves up as the sole judge of their own actions, recognizing neither God nor God's law. *Pesha* signifies the refusal of a person to consider themselves accountable to a moral compass for their actions. For this type of person, there are no external standards of right and wrong. Right is the name they give to those actions which pleases them and furthers their aims, wrong to those which displease them and frustrate their aims. Perhaps we can think of some leaders like this? Their actions can affect us all.

Avon comes from a root meaning to be twisted or to be crooked. It refers to the person whose course in life is deflected from the pursuit of the good. It refers also to the twist in a person's character which seems to impel them to do wrong, to a perversity of temperament which propels them in the direction of wrongdoing. We try and stay away from such people and such bad habits.

Het is the third term comes from a root meaning to miss the mark. It is used for example of an Archer whose arrows failed to hit the target despite their aiming to do so. *Het's* failure is to follow the good path, to a lack of character or staying power which prevents them from arriving at the goal they have set themselves. Blame is attached even to unwitting sin if it could have been avoided with the exercise of greater care; the careless driver, the neglectful teacher, the overindulgent grandparent or the thoughtless child are all guilty of *Het*. *Het* is the one we have to worry about for though our intentions may be

worthy, we cannot as humans always get it right. It is the casual, hurtful remark, the unnecessary jump to judgement, the poor choice of behavior or habit.

Het can be very painful in our lives. It can be self-limiting or shameful, full of self-guilt. We may find we can't shake it off or we avoid even confronting it. Someone I know speaks sharply to others which is often a sign of her judgements about others who annoy her or make her feel awkward. Her hurtful comments become who she is and people avoid her to her disappointment and embarrassment. She remains lonely and judgmental.

But the remedy for *Het* is *teshuva* - repentance meaning to return to the right road, the straight path, the bullseye, the true self.

So how do we go about doing *teshuva*?

Maimonides in the 12th century summarized the laws of repentance with the following statement: "How does one confess one's sins? You say, "I implore you God, I sinned, I transgressed, I committed iniquity before You by doing the following. Behold I regret and am embarrassed by my deeds. I promise never to repeat this act again".

There are four steps here, each of which can get stalled along the way:

- Recognize and discontinue the improper action.
- Verbally confess the action, thus giving the action a concrete form in your own mind.
- Regret the action. ...
- Determine never to repeat the action.

Recognizing our character and conduct might even be the hardest thing we have to do in this process. That is what the silence in Yom Kippur is all about. It's the space between the words and music that becomes the time to reflect and recall those actions that we regret or intend to alter. Maybe that is as far as we get this year. Yes, I did speak harshly, yes, I was quick to judge, yes, I didn't handle that situation emotionally very well.

Confessing our actions and regretting them is built into our liturgy in the section named *vidui* or confession, 'We sin against you when we sin against ourselves'. There are only two times that we Jews are asked to make confession and that is on Yom Kippur and our deathbed. We may lightly tap upon our hearts while reciting the confession in order for our hearts to open to a better possibility. And then to be specific about what we did wrong. It is not OK to say, I'm sorry if something I said offended you! Or I'm sorry about yesterday! Be specific, open up to the behavior and name it. I was cruel when I spoke to you. I admit I left you out of the decision. Yes, I was being difficult, and I admit it.

But determining never to repeat the action is entirely on us. Maimonides reminds us, you can't just sin, repent and sin again. You have to internally commit to not repeating your mistake. I commit to not shouting at you when we disagree. I promise I will listen first and not interrupt you.

Maimonides goes on to ask, "who has complete *teshuva*?" A person who confronts the same situation in which they sinned when they have the potential to do it again and they do not, because of their *teshuvah*. I could have gone for another helping of chocolate cake, but I made a commitment to cut back so I can be healthier. I said I would get there on time and I need to fulfill that commitment this time.

In her book *Nine Essential Ingredients of a True Apology*, Nancy Lerner states the following

1. A true apology does not include the word 'but'. I know I was bad, but you were the one who started it... I am sorry but it's been a stressful time for me!
2. Keep the focus on your actions and not on the other person's response
3. A true apology includes an offer of reparation that fits the situation.
4. Do not overdo it – I am soooooo sorry. You have to forgive me. I shall die if you don't!!
5. Does not get caught up in who is more to blame or who started it!
6. Requires that you do your best not to repeat it
7. Should not serve to silence. I'm truly sorry. No, listen to me, I couldn't be more sorry. You don't know how sorry I am. Sorry doesn't even cut it. It was simply the worst thing ever and you don't need to say a thing.
8. Should not be offered to make you feel better
9. Does not ask the hurt party to do anything, not even to forgive. You must must must forgive me this time! Please be my friend still.

The word *kippur* in Yom Kippur can be translated as 'cover' – a day of covering the sin. It is a day to cover it over, not to hide it but to use the day to discover, uncover and fully cover our character and conduct. That is what we call atonement or at-one-ment. The actions we have done in the past cannot be undone but the action can be atoned by turning its impact into something different in us for the future. What we have done in the past becomes the very thing we can change for our future.

On a heavier note, Rachel Goldberg, the mother of murdered hostage Hersch Goldberg-Polin offered a teaching on *teshuva* to the Israeli Government this past week.

She said some Government officials in power tried to come to us during Shiva for Hersch. We actually said please we don't want those people here. When you make a choice to do something that you know is wrong according to Jewish law, you bear the punishment for that sin. Don't come and ask me to forgive you for that sin. I'm not the right address. The real *teshuva* is when you find yourself in the exact same situation

where you did the thing that you know was wrong and you choose differently. What I would challenge those people who wanted to come to us, after they chose not to save the six hostages including my son, is you now have 101 chances to do it, the number of remaining hostages and that's the *teshuva*. You don't have to come to me and ask for forgiveness. You have to act differently the next time.

A Hasidic teaching says, "If one places in front of the window, many thin and threadbare sheets, they have the same effect in screening the light of the sun as one heavy blanket." Similarly, it is not only the serious sins which act as a screen between the divine light and the soul, but also the lesser offences such as hiding oneself from the needs of the poor, indulging in slanderous talk, flying into a rage, showing pride, and many other such offences.

The Talmud teaches that people should always regard themselves that they are half guilty and half meritorious and if they perform one good deed, happy are they for weighing themselves down on the scale of merit. If they commit one transgression woe to them for weighing themselves down in the scale of guilt.

This is our day of *teshuvah*, to consider our faults of character and conduct and to recognize and confess to them. We can turn from our old ways and habits and return to our better, truer, happier and more complete selves. We can use this day to cover that we which we need to consider to lighten our shame, embarrassment or guilt and the pain of having missed the mark again this year in little and big ways. Use the words, the music and the silence of Yom Kippur to bring you home to yourself.

Help us to return to you and we shall return.