

Shanah tovah.

I recently discovered a blog called Sorry Watch (sorrywatch.com, check it out after Yom Kippur) that evaluates apologies, especially apologies in the public sphere, and takes apart what makes them good or bad. Most of them are bad. And one of the things that many of the bad apologies have in common is a failure to name the wrongdoing. The apologizer says something like: "I'm sorry if I offended anyone," "I apologize for the pain I have caused," "I'm sorry that your feelings were hurt." Yet at least these subpar apologies involve taking accountability. They're written in the first person singular. They acknowledge that I am the person responsible, even if they can't go as far as saying what they were responsible for.

Like the Sorry Watch bloggers, Rambam posits that the first step towards repenting, achieving forgiveness, and moving forwards is naming what we've done wrong, and he is also committed to taking responsibility in the first person. His Laws of Teshuvah begin: "If a person has violated any mitzvot of the Torah, a 'do' or a 'do not,' whether it was on purpose or by accident, when they are going to do teshuvah and repent of their sin- they are obligated to confess before the Holy Blessed One."¹

Without being able to say aloud what we have done wrong, we cannot correct the consequences of those wrongdoings. If we do not own up to bad behavior, we cannot change it. And we spend a lot of time on Yom Kippur doing that confessing and naming. But counter to the examples of SorryWatch and Rambam, we do that confessing and naming in the plural:

"אשמנו. בגדנו. גזלנו."

¹ Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Laws of Repentance 1:1

“**We** have abused. **We** have betrayed. **We** have stolen.”

"על חטא שחטאנו לפניך באנס וברצון..."

“For the sin which **we** have committed against You willingly and unwillingly...”

This plural is familiar; we pray in the plural all the time. Yet from the kids in the family service- it is this confessing in the plural that generally raises lots of objections. “Wait, but I didn’t steal anything this year!”

And those kids are right. On this day of our verdicts being sealed, it is downright irresponsible to confess sins that we didn’t commit! After all, each of us has done enough wrong that we don’t also need to be burdened by the mistakes that we DIDN’T even make!

There are many platitudes and explanations to be offered- we don’t want to embarrass anyone by forcing them to really admit their own sins before the community. Or we’re all accountable for each others’ wrongdoings because we allowed them to happen.

But actually, there’s a nuanced balancing act happening here, between the individual and the communal. Yom Kippur, and this whole season, is a time for deep introspection. Looking into ourselves, taking stock, committing to change. Apologizing and taking responsibility, as would please Rambam and Sorry Watch. Yet we do that in a room filled with hundreds of other people, using a liturgy that has way more to do with “us” than it has to do with “me.”

And I think that in this jumble- of me and of us- of naming our own wrongdoings and of confessing everyone’s wrongdoings, we’re missing something critical. Rambam gives us a formula for how to confess:

כִּיצַד מְתוּדִין?

How should one confess?

אָמַר אֲנִי הַשֵּׁם חָטָאתִי עָוִיתִי פָּשַׁעְתִּי לְפָנֶיךָ וְעָשִׂיתִי כָךְ וְכָךְ

One should say: God, I have sinned, I have transgressed, I have done wrong before you by doing X and Y.²

Indeed, this is also how the rabbis describe the confession of the Kohen Gadol, the High Priest, on Yom Kippur, which we will reenact tomorrow during Musaf.

But the Kohen Gadol does not say this confession only for **himself**. He says it once for himself and his family, once for the priests and Levites collectively, and once for the entire people of Israel.

Now we may be uncomfortable with many pieces of the Temple system. And we might raise an eyebrow at the idea of a high priest serving as an intermediary between us and God. After all, how can **he** confess **our** sins? How can we be accountable for our own behavior if someone else is doing the work of teshuvah for us? Doesn't Rambam and SorryWatch's model of individual confession just make so much more sense?!

But something tremendously powerful is happening here. In confessing not only his own sins, but the sins of the entire people, the High Priest is pleading on their behalf before God. He does not stop with the confession, but continues:

אָנָּה בָּשִׂים. כִּפֹּר נָא לַחֲטָאִים וְלַעֲוֹנוֹת וְלַפְּשָׁעִים. שְׁחַטְאוּ וְשַׁעְוּ וְשַׁפְּשְׁעוּ לְפָנֶיךָ עַמְּךָ בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל.

Please, God, **atone** for the sins, the transgressions, the wrongdoings that Your people, Israel, have done before You.³

And I think that this is the missing piece of the individual and collective puzzle of Yom Kippur prayer. We find ourselves stuck in two modalities:

² Ibid.

³ Avodah service

accounting of ourselves, pleading for our **own** souls, **OR** confessing in the **plural** as part of the community.

We imagine that we are praying **FOR** ourselves, **WITH** each other. But what we are really supposed to be doing is praying **FOR** each other, **together**.

The idea of “praying for” someone may sometimes feels deeply foreign. We seem to be comfortable with it when we are praying for someone who is sick, as we do every Shabbat in the Mi Sheberach for those are ill. But beyond that, I think the idea of praying for others starts to feel proselytize-y, or like someone is functioning as an intermediary.

But there is a long and deeply Jewish history of prayer for others. Tekhines, personal prayers written in Yiddish for women (and often by women) included countless instances of asking our ancestors to pray before God on their behalf, especially connected to the High Holidays: “We ask our mother Sarah to plead for us in this hour of judgement...” “We ask our mother Rachel to plead for us, that we may inscribed and sealed for good.”⁴

And lest we assume that this model, of praying for others, only works with the avot, imahot, and kohen gadol, with the larger-than-life characters of the Jewish story; the Talmud teaches explicitly:

צריך להודיע צערו לרבים, ורבים יבקשו עליו רחמים

One must announce their pain to the masses, so that the masses may pray for mercy upon him.⁵

⁴ “Tkhine of the Matriarchs for the Shofar” by Seral bas Jacob (Translation from Four Centuries of Jewish Women’s Spirituality)

⁵ B. Talmud 67a

This is so counter to the way we usually conceive of prayer, or at least the way I usually conceive of prayer. Being part of a prayer community, as we all are in this moment, is about more than simply standing before God together. It is about pleading on each others' behalf. Not just on behalf of the community as a whole, but on behalf of every other member of the community as an individual.

Much to the outrage of fairness-minded children, we confess each others' wrongdoings. But that's not really what the communal nature of Jewish prayer is about. It's really about asking for forgiveness, atonement, mercy, and inscriptions in the Book of Life for each other as well.

Given the theology of Yom Kippur, this is hugely radical. My fate for the year is being sealed today, and yet I am expected not only to plead on my own behalf, but on yours! There are only 25 hours- now closer to 23. The gates are already closing. And I am called to devote some of that time to pleading for others.

That act of giving of ourselves to others- in prayer, but certainly not only in prayer- has the power to transform ourselves, our relationships, and our community. And we can find examples of that transformation in unexpected places. The Torah teaches: "When you encounter your enemy's ox or donkey wandering, you must take it back to him. When you see the donkey of your enemy lying under its burden and would refrain from raising it, you must nevertheless raise it with him."⁶

We might be tempted to read these verses as being about our relationship to animals, but Rabbi Benno Jacob teaches that it's actually about our

⁶ Exodus 23:4-5

relationships with each other. He imagines how this donkey-raising mitzvah might actually play out in the real world:

“At the beginning, such a venture would be done in silence, but then some exchange will be necessary for the effort to succeed; that will break the ice and finally the enemy would have to express thanks, which may very well build a bridge of friendship, so that they could leave not as enemies but as brothers.”

Now fallen donkeys and Yom Kippur may seem to have nothing to do with each other. But I think that the imagination of Rabbi Jacob highlights the way that fulfilling our obligations to each other can be transformative. When we help an enemy- or a stranger- we create a scenario that leads us towards love. And when hear someone else’s pain and plead for mercy for them, we build bonds of connection and kinship.

Rabbi Jacob continues: “Not common need brought them together, but danger to one, which led the other to be helpful. This provides instruction in the practical aspects of love of neighbor.” So, too, praying together in community is ultimately about instruction in the practical aspects of love thy neighbor.

We still need to do personal accounting, to name our own wrongdoings, and to work towards being better versions of ourselves in 5779. But that work is incomplete if it is not paired with supporting others in their efforts.

And this is about so much more than prayer. If I plead on your behalf on Yom Kippur, beg that God forgives you and seals you in the Book of Life, then I’d better also respect you, listen to you, care for you- because how can I ask God to treat you lovingly and not treat you lovingly myself? I’d better make sure that you

have enough to eat, access to medical care, a safe home- For how can I ask God to seal you in the Book of Life and not do what I can to keep you alive?

This Yom Kippur, and this year, may we have the generosity to pray not just for ourselves, but for each other. And may we internalize that if tradition calls upon us to give of ourselves in this most extreme way- to give some of our limited air time of the holiest day of the year and plead on behalf of others- then surely this is how we must behave when Yom Kippur is over.

If we are expected to have others in mind even when our own destinies are hanging in the balance, then tomorrow, as normal daily life resumes, we may not abandon each other. Indeed, if we are as generous and loving towards each other all year as the rabbis urge us to be today, our relationships and our world will be transformed, and we will have far less to repent for next Yom Kippur.

G'mar Chatimah Tovah, May each of us be sealed in the Book of Life.