

# For All Our Sins

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

The Torah introduces us to the idea that we confess our sins to God (Leviticus 5:5 and 16:21). To God, not to humans—priests or otherwise—because, according to our tradition, it is a question of human dignity not to demean ourselves in the eyes of other human beings by revealing our errors to other humans. But the Torah gives us no text or procedure (as indeed it does not for prayer in general). Atonement is one thing. It is explicit in general and specifically for Yom Kipur. Even so, the rabbis argue at length as to what atones and how.

The first example we have of confession comes in the Book of Daniel (Chapter 9:4-5): “So I prayed to Hashem my God, and I confessed, and I said...we have sinned, we have strayed, we have done evil, we have rebelled, and we have turned away from your commandments.”

But this was a one-off. A personal response to a crisis. During the Temple period, the goats of atonement were sacrificed on the Day of Atonement. And the High Priest delivered prayers of atonement for himself, the priests, and the Children of Israel. Sometime later the tradition developed to ask for forgiveness in a daily *Tahanun* prayer, which also added *Nefilat Apayim*—literally, falling on one’s face. It was part of the morning and afternoon services. But one does not recite it on Shabbat and festivals, and on happy occasions, like a marriage or a Brit. Or in certain circles on the anniversary of the death of an important religious master (which occurs nowadays almost every day of the year so in practice they avoid saying it altogether).

It would seem logical that this idea should be expanded on the one day in the year the Torah insists we seek forgiveness for all our sins, namely *Yom Kipur*, the Day of Atonement. The first evidence we have of this expanded prayer comes in a poem of the great Amram Gaon, who lived in Babylonia/Persia in the eighth century. It is a prayer known as *Ashamnu* (*we are guilty*), now found in all prayerbooks. And in pious circles there is a custom, mainly Ashkenazi, to thump (or just tap) one’s ribcage at the mention of each sin.

His text goes thus:

*We have been guilty. We have betrayed. We have stolen. We have spoken falsely. We have distorted. We have been evil. We have been arrogant. We have been violent. We have been deceitful. We have plotted. We have given bad advice. We have lied. We have scorned. We have rebelled. We have provoked. We have turned people away. We have betrayed. We have sinned. We have agitated. We have been stiff-necked. We have been wicked. We have destroyed. We have lusted. We have deceived. We have strayed.*

Now it is important to realize that this is a poem, a serious and sad one indeed. Medieval Hebrew poetry and liturgical songs often used an acrostic, the first letter of the author's name at the beginning of each verse. Much earlier examples of using letters rather than rhymes are to be found in the Book of Psalms, where several of them start each verse with a letter of the alphabet—notably, the *Ashrei* Psalm, now part of our daily services. And there are other examples to found throughout the prayerbook. So it is with *Ashamnu*, each sin starts with a sequential letter of the Hebrew alphabet. It sounds artificial to us, but this was the convention throughout the Jewish world at that time.

This said, it is clear that we are dealing not with a scientific or consistent list of crimes that we personally might have carried out, but rather a poetic portrait of human misdemeanors in general. Which is why the language is not that "I have sinned", but that "we have". "We" being a people or humanity in general, so it is possible that one may be unable to identify in this list any sin one may have personally committed. Quite the contrary. We may even laugh at how absurd and exaggerated it is. However, if one really thinks about and is honest with oneself, there are a lot of things on that list that we have indeed done wrong. Yet, however perfect we may be, we can be sure that humanity is certainly in need of rectification. As the Talmud often reminds us, the good are caught up in the morass of evil that bad, selfish, or uncaring people do to degrade human life.

The longest poem of forgiveness we now have is the *Al Cheyt* prayer that dominates the *Yom Kipur* liturgy. It is a late medieval creation. While it is clearly related to the *Ashamnu* prayer, it has been expanded and includes a chorus, too, which implies that it was sung as well as read. It too is based on the Hebrew alphabet, which means that repetitions and unusual word usages play an important part to ensure that each phrase or line starts or includes the appropriate letter of the alphabet. Sometimes one can find English translations that try to be true to the original spirit by getting verses and keywords to fit into the English alphabet. All this means that sometimes the original (and certainly the translations) are forced and not always very inspiring.

Here is one of three stanzas that repeat categories of sins. The first two sins begin with the first letter, Aleph, each of the next two verses repeat letters in sequence. As in *Ashamnu*, you can see how often the same action is expressed in different words, in order to fit the alphabet sequence of each letter:

*For the sin we have committed under [ ] duress and willingly  
For the sin we have committed through being [ ] hard-hearted  
For the sin we have committed [ ] without realizing it  
For the sin we have committed through [ ] words that passed our  
lips  
For the sin we have committed in [ ] public and private  
For the sin we have committed through [ ] immorality  
[and so on with letters of the Hebrew alphabet for the rest of the  
list]*

*For the sin we have committed through speech  
For the sin we have committed intent and deception  
For the sin we have committed through private thoughts  
For the sin we have committed by being unkind to neighbors  
For the sin we have committed through insincere confession  
For the sin we have committed by being attracted to vice  
For the sin we have committed knowingly and deceitfully  
For the sin we have committed intentionally and unintentionally  
For the sin we have committed by disrespecting parents and teachers  
For the sin we have committed through physical aggression  
For the sin we have committed by desecrating God's name  
For the sin we have committed through thoughtless expressions  
For the sin we have committed by impure lips  
For the sin we have committed by giving in to our evil inclination  
For the sin we have committed knowingly and not knowingly*

***For all of these, forgiving God, forgive us, pardon us, atone for us.***

These are repeated with minor variations throughout the stanzas.

The long services on the Holy Days that embellish the core contents are not to be found before medieval times. They developed in part because of the constant suffering of exile and the need to beg for relief and hope that asking for forgiveness, pouring out their souls, might bring respite. But also because fear of being attacked forced communities to stay together for protection, both when they prayed and on the way home. Synagogues were also often the only congenial buildings to be in during eras of stinking hovels, confined ghettos, and poverty.

Added to this, the medieval cultures of Islam and Christianity considered composing poetry, whether for God or human beings, to be the highest form of art and worship. So more and more poems were added to services and celebratory meals. Kabbalists, in particular, took it all to a higher level. And thanks to Guttenberg, printing presses made texts readily available. Nowadays many of us prefer a simpler, more minimalist approach.

How are we expected to respond to all this? Not, I believe, by feeling guilty. Guilt is a negative emotion. And totally unproductive and debilitating, unless it motivates us to change. Not by thinking that we are above sin or perfect. And certainly not by forcing oneself to repeat every single word and focus on its meaning, relevance, or appropriateness to us personally so many times, over and over.

The sounds, the repetitions, the ideas are there to create an atmosphere, to help us focus on the range of human frailties we are all subject to, rather than ticking off lists to see which do and which do not apply to us. We are not meant to be taking an exam, aiming at perfect grades. (Nice as it might be to achieve that.) There is no norm. We are all different. We all do some good and some bad. But we can all find ways in which we have failed this past year and determine to try to improve in the next.

May we all do better this coming year.