

YK: Sin (Vidui) and Cathy and the Doll buggy

When I was four years old, my mother used to boast that I was clearly brilliant, as I could read my favorite book, “Kathy and the Doll Buggy,” cover to cover. That wasn’t quite accurate. Truth is, because I loved it so much and she read it to me so often, I actually memorized the whole thing. Little did I realize that this treasured tale also served as a lesson about Teshuvah/repentance.

Decades later, even though I now have trouble remembering what I had for dinner last night, I still remember the first sentence of that book: “Kathy is a busy little girl.” Here’s the synopsis: Kathy’s big sister, Helen receives a doll buggy for Christmas, leading Kathy to break the 10th commandment: “Thou shall not covet.” She rationalizes that her doll Maria, (who likely hails from Mexico, as the illustration depicts Maria sitting near a cactus, as a man wearing a sombrero rides a donkey in the distance) is ill because she is having trouble adjusting to her new American climate. Nothing that a good brisk walk in the sun couldn’t fix. Kathy then commits a grave sin (well, at least that’s how my four year old mind perceived it): she clandestinely borrows the buggy when Helen is at school.

Joined by her friend Tim, they take a walk into town. It never occurred to me to ask why Kathy, who wasn't even old enough to be in school, would be allowed to leave home with her young buddy, but her mother seems to have no problem with that. They have a grand old time, and Kathy takes Maria out of the buggy so she can see the window display in a toyshop. Tim's older brother happens to drive by and offers to give them a ride home just before a torrential storm hits. The buggy is left behind. You know where this is going.....

Helen comes home from school and immediately notices that her buggy is gone. Kathy is totally busted, but she comes clean and confesses. Helen is not so understanding about Maria and her weather-related illness, and chastises her sister, upon which the two burst into tears.

As luck would have it, however, the kind lady at the toyshop noticed the buggy outside and brought it in before the rain began. She calls to relate the good news. Helen is relieved but still angry at Kathy, who, although not actually saying the words "I'm sorry," tells Helen, "I knew it was not right to take your doll buggy, Helen...and I will never do it again."

Helen grants forgiveness, and, after they walk back to retrieve the buggy, she even lets Kathy push it home. A happy ending!

Now I considered myself to be a very good girl. I lived to please my mother, and could never dream of incurring her or anyone else's wrath, so I experienced deliciously decadent pleasure seeing it happen to someone else. And the fact that it all came out ok in the end, and that Kathy didn't have to suffer for her sin, made me feel that as long as I was brave enough to admit occasional wrongdoing, I would escape punishment as well.

That wasn't always the case, especially when I was caught mercilessly tormenting my newborn brother, but I didn't consider that a sin anyway. If anything, I was the victim, and my parents the ones at fault for bringing an unwanted being (in my eyes, at least) into our happy home in the first place. After all, I saw right through their feeble attempt to appease me by buying me a Chatty Cathy doll shortly after my brother's birth. Shameless bribery. But I digress.

At first glance, *Kathy and the Doll Buggy* appears to outline the direct path to Teshuvah: Kathy sins, admits her wrongdoing, and confesses to the injured party, resolving to never repeat her mistake. She is then forgiven.

Upon further examination, however, it's not quite so clear. Because besides being "a busy little girl" Kathy was also a lucky little girl. The buggy was saved. No harm, no foul. True, Kathy made a wrong choice and Helen was deceived, but a valuable lesson was learned without any major casualties. I imagine that confession is much easier when the injured party isn't really all that injured.

But what if things had turned out differently? What if Kathy had remembered to bring the buggy home and Helen was none the wiser? Kathy obviously knew what she did was wrong, because she conveniently neglected to tell her mother that she was taking the buggy in the first place. But after having gotten away with it the first time would she have continued to repeat her actions? Would she have ever realized that what she was doing was wrong? Would she have eventually been overcome by guilt and thus be compelled to confess? Or did she only confess because she was caught?

And what if the buggy had actually been ruined in the rain? Because it survived intact, there were no punitive consequences for Kathy. Would Kathy have had to endure disciplinary action if the buggy was damaged? Interesting, too, that she only tried to make amends after finding out that the buggy was rescued. Would she still have apologized if things had gone badly for her?

And would Helen have forgiven her so quickly? Inquisitive as I was, these questions never entered my four-year-old mind. I was content to accept the story at face value and celebrate its positive outcome. Reading it again 47 years later, the story is far less satisfying.

How often do we truly even recognize our own sins? And even if we keep track, how often do we own up to them? And even if we are mindfully aware of our shortcomings, I imagine that most of us don't keep a tally of our sins as diligently as my husband tallies up his Weight Watchers points after every single meal. Nor should we. But on Yom Kippur, and the month that precedes it, we certainly make up for it! The **Vidui**, or confessional, (from the Hebrew "*l'hitvadot*: to confess") is chanted in each of the five Yom Kippur services: last night in Maariv, today in the morning Shacharit service, the additional Musaf service, the afternoon Mincha service, and an abbreviated form in the Neilah or closing service.

Not only that, we actually have two forms of the **Vidui**: the short version, or "*Ashamnu*" and the longer "*Al Cheyt*." Both are alphabetical acrostics, naming sins from alef to tav. There are 22 letters in the Alef Bet, and each sin in the *Ashamnu* is represented by one Hebrew word, although there are 24 words in all because three sins are ascribed to the letter "tav."

The *Al Cheyt* is a double acrostic, with two complete sentences that begin with each letter, for a total of 44 verses. We saw that 44 verse version in the Maariv/Evening service last night, but the versions we chant today are pared down to 22 verses each, effectively splitting last night's *Al Cheyt* in half and alternating between the two for the rest of today. We say the word "sin" (*cheyt*, in Hebrew) 132 times in 24 hours: more than we probably utter the word during the entire rest of the year!

And it's not a comfortable word for us to say either, especially as Jews. It connotes fire and brimstone - not exactly what you'd call Jewish imagery. And if we're going to say it over 100 times, it's important to have a clear definition of what it means. So here it is, according to the Free online dictionary and I warn you: it isn't pretty: "A transgression of a religious or moral law, especially when deliberate; Deliberate disobedience to the known will of God. A condition of estrangement from God resulting from such disobedience; something regarded as being shameful, deplorable, or utterly wrong." Here are some common synonyms: wickedness, iniquity, depravity, debauchery. Now honestly, how many of us really believe that we commit enough of these immoral acts to warrant admitting it 132 times in one day?

Rabbi Jeffrey Salkin states, “I sense that there are many Jews today who would like to find a different translation and definition of *chet*, the Days of Awe’s most prominent term for ‘sin.’ We have been quick to relate *chet* to its original connotation ‘to miss the mark,’ as when an archer misses the target. This explanation might still work – if more people played with bows and arrows.” He goes on to explain that our synonyms are also a bit tempered, and include words such as, “stain, debt and burden.”

Indeed, the idea of “sin as burden” was taken literally by our ancestors, who engaged in a ceremony whereby their sins were transferred to a goat who was then released into the wilderness. Rabbi Salkin remarks, “The ancient Israelites carried their sins (*nosei avon*), and the scapegoat was a veritable beast of burden.” Today, we perform a ritual known as *Tashlich*, which we will do immediately following services. Our sins are symbolically represented by breadcrumbs, which we throw into a running body of water, thus washing those sins away.

Still, no matter how we couch it, there’s no getting around it. Sinning is serious business. And our text is clear. We say, “*Al cheyt she-cha-tanu l’fanecha*: for the sin we have committed against *You*” - and by “*You*” we mean God.

So let's take a look at some of these sins and think about what we're actually confessing to over and over again. Here's just a sampling: "we have sinned against You by corrupt speech, sexual immorality, evil thoughts, licentiousness, insincere confession, disrespecting parents and teachers, violence, bribery, mocking, slander, perverting justice, desecrating God's name, rejecting God's commandments." And the list goes on.

Now while all of us can admit to some, it's difficult to relate to all of these iniquities. I doubt that the majority of us are guilty of usury and extortion. The language can be a bit befuddling as well. In the shorter Ashamnu, a mahzor I formerly used translated the sins alphabetically in English as well as Hebrew, and I always paused when I came to the "x" word: xenophobic. I didn't even know what that meant, and every year I resolved to look it up, but I never remembered to. My attitude of contrition turned into frustration, and frustration just led to distraction. By the way, for those of you who don't know, xenophobia is "an intense or irrational fear or dislike of people from other countries." (Hopefully another one that doesn't apply to most of us). This attempt to conform to the acrostic model just became amusing by the end, as the "y" and "z" were translated, "We *yield* to evil, we are *zealots* for bad causes." Seems like the authors really had to stretch.

Besides the language, the choreography can be somewhat awkward as well. As we list each sin, we gently beat our chests in what has been interpreted by some as symbolically punishing ourselves for our wrongdoing. Of course as children, my friends and I always found this funny, and we stifled giggles as we tried to see who could hit ourselves the hardest while still appearing discrete. Obviously not the point of the action.

So here we are, confessing to things that many of us have trouble connecting to, using words that we may not completely understand, while engaging in an act of minor self-flagellation. And to top it off, we are admitting to these grave offenses while chanting a melody in an upbeat major key. Not to mention the fact that after so many repetitions, it's a challenge to even keep focused on the words themselves. So the big question is: How do we find personal connection and meaning in this challenging exercise?

Perhaps we should begin by reframing the word "sin." Rabbi Salkin ties this into the action of beating one's chest. We are vulnerable to sin when our hearts are hardened, when we become oblivious to God's commandments and to each other's needs as well, and thus we beat our chests to engage in some "spiritual CPR", massaging that hardened heart so that it can beat freely again.

He claims, “...There is every good reason to imagine sin as a miniature death – a death of the spirit.” Therefore, Rabbi Salkin offers a new, albeit not literal, translation for Al Cheyt: “For the death of the spirit that comes from.....” That spirit can be revived through confession and teshuvah.

Although evoking powerful imagery, this definition is a bit too dramatic for me. Let’s go back to the traditional definition of *cheyt*, namely: “missing the mark,” or “going astray.” This implies that we had every intention of “getting it right,” but somehow, we got off track. I’m directionally challenged. Despite the fact that I diligently print up Google Maps every time I need to go somewhere new, invariably I’ll misread something, and end up completely lost. Whenever this happens, Richard is on high alert, keeping his phone at the ready so that when he receives my hysterical call, he can calmly guide me back in the right direction.

Yom Kippur is our yearly opportunity to be guided back in the right direction. We admit that despite our best efforts, we’ve gotten a bit lost, and we need to find our way again. Being behaviorally lost results in forgetting where God has directed us to go, so we become further separated from our Creator as well.

In this sense, sin is a separation from God, from our divine purpose and intentions, and from that spark of holiness that lives within us. So here's my figurative definition of Al Cheyt: "For becoming separated or estranged from You when we....." Or maybe even, "For turning away from You....." which makes the process of Teshuvah, *returning*, even more significant.

And what about those sins themselves? This is communal confession, after all. How can we confess to things that we know we haven't personally done? Perhaps it's better to simply state those sins that we can individually own up to, and change "Shechatunu: *we have sinned*" to "shechatati: *I have sinned.*" But if our prayer, our confession, is private anyway, why do we need to be in community? We can pray just as easily at home. I would venture to say that a large percentage of our people do just that most of the time, or perhaps don't even pray at all. But yet, synagogues all over the world are full on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Why this need to not just emotionally return, but physically return as well?

Perhaps because we all have an intrinsic need to spiritually check in periodically, not only with ourselves and with God, but with each other.

It's hard to admit our vulnerabilities, our shortcomings, our failings, and perhaps we wouldn't even bother if left to our own devices. But there is safety and comfort in numbers. We are all here for the same reason. And we stand together as a community to acknowledge that. Rabbi Daniel Zemel states, "We may open the prayer book as individuals, but we read it as part of an eternal people. The ancients, our forebears, thought as part of a collective. I may have been deceitful and dishonest. Someone else was arrogant and devious; a third was aggressive and self-serving. Collectively, we own them all. "Kol Yisrael arevim zeh lazeh – all Israel is responsible for one another – we take communal ownership of all our sins." In short, we're all in this together.

But because we are human, and the list is long, and we reiterate it repeatedly, it can be easy to lose focus. Here's what I suggest: you may want to concentrate on just a few statements that really resonate with you, and reflect on them. You may even start to identify themes. For example, of the 44 verses outlined in Al Chet, 11 of them all revolve around the sin of ***LaShon Hara***, evil speech/tongue. That's a good percentage! For me, this transgression is one of the most difficult to overcome, because we confront it numerous times on a daily basis.

Just noticing how many times it's mentioned in the *Al Chet* reminds me of the seriousness of this offense, and of the need to be mindful of how easily I succumb to it myself. But that's a sermon for next year.

Although I believe that it is important for many reasons to preserve the integrity of the original prayer, as Reform Jews I also think it's important to engage in the tradition of joining our voices to those of the past. Exactly one month ago, I asked you to **add your own personal *Al Cheyt*** to the list, and I plan to share some of them with you throughout the day. Through the years, I hope this list will grow, and will be a lasting Beth Shalom legacy. Here are a few of mine:

For the sin of self-absorption

For the sin of harsh self-criticism

For the sin of being too judgmental of others

For the sin of narrow-mindedness

For the sin of not being fully present when we are needed

“And for all of these, God of forgiveness, forgive us, pardon us, absolve us”

If you haven't done it this year, I challenge you to put yours on paper. You don't even have to wait until next year to do it. And if you do, I invite you to share them next Yom Kippur. It's not an easy exercise, but it's an invaluable one.

I'd like to think that little Kathy would've stepped up, done the right thing and admitted her naughty indiscretion even if she wasn't caught the first time. I'd like to think that if Helen's buggy was beyond repair that Kathy would find some way to repair their relationship, whether it meant becoming Helen's indentured servant for a while, or contributing her next year's allowance money to the new buggy fund. And I'd also like to think that Helen would forgive her despite the damage. Now that would be a story of true Teshuvah. Perhaps I should write a sequel.

Amen!!

Remarks from Lynda

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