

Yom Kippur: Ahavnu, Beirachnu: Yom Kippur is a Time to Confess Our Good

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My wife, Toby, and I years ago attended a seminar called “Marriage Encounter.” Its goal: to help good marriages become better.

At the outset we were asked to write, for ourselves and ourselves alone, what we believed were our positive and negative qualities.

At first I had difficulty identifying my positives — what I know to be the truth — as opposed to what others thought of me, and how I may have fooled them into thinking what is not quite true. While I did manage to claim some positives that felt worthy, it was a struggle to reach them.

As it turned out, I was not alone in this difficulty: most of the participants found it easier to write about their negatives than their positives.

The presenters explained that, deep down, people by and large lack confidence in their own abilities. We may “put on airs,” appearing confident and capable, but at heart most people — even the most successful — lack belief in themselves.

This is a major stumbling block in developing loving relationships and good marriages. The famous biblical mandate “Love thy neighbor as thyself” makes this point. The prerequisite to loving an “other” is to love oneself.

I often think of this Marriage Encounter moment during the High Holidays, especially on Yom Kippur — the Day of Atonement — when over and over we recite the Vidui, the confession prayer. While beating our hearts we follow the order of the Hebrew alphabet declaring our transgressions: *ashamnu* (אשמונו), *bagadnu* (בגדנו), *gazalnu* (גזלנו), *dibarnu dofi* (דברנו דפי) — we have trespassed, we have dealt treacherously, we have robbed, we have spoken slander. The benefit of the Vidui confession is its potential for inspiring the commitment to improve.

But repetitive Vidui can also have an opposite effect: it can bring one to despair, to loss of confidence, even to loss of belief in one’s capacity to do good. After so many *ashamnus*, one may be left overwhelmed, wondering, “Is there anything I’ve done right? Do I have the capacity to make positive contributions to the world?”

Relative to Vidui, it is important to recognize that Yom Kippur is not only a solemn day but a joyous one. The Jerusalem Talmud puts it this way:

“Said Rabbi Abahu: The way of the word is that when one comes to be judged, one wears black clothes, and allows his beard to grow long and unkempt, concerned about the outcome of his case. This is not the case concerning the People of Israel. The Book of Life and Death are before us, who will live and who will die. And yet, we wear white, we wrap ourselves in white garments, we trim our beards and we believe that the Holy One, Blessed Be He, will act kindly towards us. (Rosh Hashanah 1:3)”

The 13th-century commentator Rabbenu Yonah adds that the final meal (seudat ha-mafseket) before the fast is viewed as a festive meal. In his words:

“On holidays, we joyously partake in meals. Bearing in mind, however, that on Yom Kippur we fast, the law was established that we eat sumptuously beforehand. As we approach Yom Kippur, we eat a hearty meal, full of optimism, belief and joy. (Sha’arei Teshuva, Gate 4, Section 9)”

This is a remarkable commentary. The Talmud views the se’udat ha-mafseket with concern, that with every bite we could choke to death. For this reason, we first pray the afternoon Mincha service, with Vidui, so that if we die during the meal, we will have at least recited a final confession. (Yoma 87b) Rabbenu Yonah turns this on its head: the meal before Yom Kippur is not a “fearful meal,” but a festive Yom Kippur meal.

In this spirit, Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak HaCohen Kook in his commentary on the Mishnah points out that just as there is a vidui la-ra, a confession for the bad, so, too, is there a vidui la-tov, a confession for the good. An example is vidui ma’aser. In the fourth and seventh year of the sabbatical cycle, we recall that we have given tithes properly over the past three years. To the priest, we gave terumah (gift offering), to the Levite, we gave tithes, in support of Jerusalem we gave the second tithes. And we helped the indigent (ma’aser ani) by giving money to the poor. In short, our actions were an all-encompassing doing good (Deuteronomy 26:12-15).

Rav Kook puts it this way:

“A person should also be joyous concerning the good he or she has done. It follows that just as there is a great benefit to self-improvement through confessing one’s sins, so is there great benefit to confessing one’s good deeds. Therefore, the commandment of Vidui was established concerning the setting aside of the obligatory gifts (terumah and ma’aser). (Rabbi Kook’s Commentary to Mishnah Ma’aser Sheni 5:10)”

Now, Rav Kook carefully insists we speak with humility of our good deeds. We can always do better. But, reminding ourselves of what we’ve done well builds self-confidence, which is critical to belief in one’s ability to do and accomplish for oneself, for Am Yisrael and for the world.

Inspired by this approach, we may consider an opposite recitation of Ashamnu, focusing on the good we’ve done. It, too, can be listed following the order of the Hebrew alphabet.¹

We have loved, we have blessed, we have grown, we have spoken positively. אָהַבְנוּ, בְּרַכְנוּ, גָּדַלְנוּ, דִּבְרַנּוּ יִפִּי

We have raised up, we have shown compassion, we have acted enthusiastically, הֶעֱלִינוּ, וְחִסְנוּ, זָרְזָנוּ

We have been empathetic, we have cultivated truth, חִמְלָנוּ, טִפְחָנוּ אֱמֶת

We have given good advice, we have respected, we have learned, we have forgiven, יַעֲזֹנוּ טוֹב, כִּבְדָנוּ, לְמַדְנוּ, מְחַלְנוּ

¹ I’m grateful to Dr. Shalom Holtz, Rabba Anat Sharbat and Rabbi Steven Exler for their help in formulating this Ahavnu. Dr. Yehudah Freidenberg did the vocalization. Subsequent to my penning of this Ahavnu, it was brought to my attention that Rabbi Binyamin Holtzman wrote another Ahavnu in 2012. It can be seen [here](#). It is a beautiful presentation.

We have comforted, we have been creative, we have stirred, נחמנו, סללנו, עוררנו

We have been spiritual activists, we have been just, we have longed for Israel, פעלנו, צדקנו, קיינו לארץ

We have been merciful, we have given full effort, רחמנו, שקדנו

We have supported, we have contributed, we have repaired. תמכנו, תרמנו, תקנו

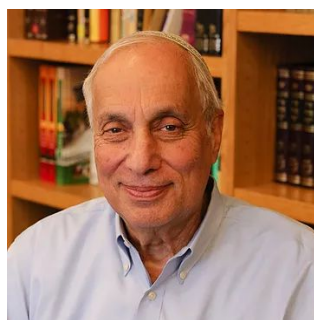
Even the traditional Ashamnu, the confession for the wrongs we've done, has overtones of optimism. Consider how music is divided into major and minor keys. Typically, the major keys are thought to be upbeat, the minor ones more melancholy.

But as Rabbi Ari Hart points out, we detail our ashamnu failures in a major key. The music is triumphant, suffused with a spirit of positive hopefulness. (You can hear the traditional ashamnu melody here.)

In advocating Ahavnu, I am not discounting Ashamnu. Rather I suggest we find room alongside our negatives, to feel good about our accomplishments both as individuals and within our community.

Perhaps everyone should consider reflecting upon his or her good attributes by writing out a personal Ahavnu in English or Hebrew alphabetical order. It would also be good to do the same relative to the Jewish community and the State of Israel. With all of our challenges, there is so much to be proud of.

Yes, Yom Kippur is an intensely serious day. It is a day of self-reflection. But it is also an “up” day. It is a day to combine tears, worries and regrets with smiles, confidence and a humble but positive sense of accomplishment. A day to lift our hands from our hearts heavenwards, while singing and dancing – ahavnu (אהבנו), berachnu (ברכנו), gadalnu (גדלנו), dibarnu yofi (דברנו יפי).



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