

## CALLING THE APOLOGY LINE: IS ANYONE LISTENING? DOES IT EVEN MATTER?

Yom Kippur Morning 5763

Does God hear our prayers? Do you think that the words we say here fly off into empty space, are thoughts projected into the abyss of eternal nothingness? Or do they have a destination? Is there a purpose to our praying? Is it communication, even if we don't hear anything in response?

What if there *is* a God? What if God somehow can *hear* or absorb all the words and melodies and anger and pain and hope and anguish that pour out of our hearts? What if we're not just sitting here, going through the motions of religious *duty*, paying our dues to the god (with a small "g") of conscience, but taking part in a sacred dialogue? And can we even call it dialogue if only one voice is heard?

Two summers ago the Cantor lent me a CD of recordings from the NPR radio program, *This American Life*. It's a two-disk album of narratives funny and tragic, sometimes both. But there was one selection, in particular, that shook me to the core. It was called *The Apology Line*.

Over twenty years ago a man by the name of Alan Bridge started a service called *The Apology Line*. It was one of those numbers you could call, like the kind you dial up to hear a psychic tell you what will be your future. Except on *The Apology Line*, it was—for all intents and purposes—a one-way conversation. You weren't speaking to anyone directly. There was no one on the other end to say "Uh huh" or offer you a comforting gesture of support. Actually, when you called you could do one of two things: You could call and leave an anonymous message on a recording machine, or you could choose to listen to other people's apologies. Sometimes Alan Bridge would offer a third choice: a place to hear his response to some of the apologies left on his machine.

I guess some of us would consider it a kind of inexpensive psychotherapy. A safe place to get things off our chests, to cathartically purge our deepest and most painful secrets. But when I listened to the half dozen confessions selected for this recording, I didn't think I was eavesdropping on someone's 45-minute hour; it sounded more to me like what it would be that God might hear on a given day—especially today.

- There was the young man who recanted a litany of sins, from arson to vandalism to terrorism.
- And there was the Israeli settler who expressed remorse for having killed six Arabs on the West Bank; even though he noted that he believed the Arabs were a direct threat to the safety of Israel as a homeland for the Jewish people, he confessed—now that he was living in America and presumably having a better perspective—maybe "killing is not the right way."
- The next confession involved a man who harbored enormous guilt for the way he treated his invalid mother; how, having no means of income for himself, he would extort money from his bedridden mother by making her pay \$5 when she wanted a glass of water or \$10 for a sandwich. He acknowledged the inherent evil of his acts, remorse for not being able to apologize to his mother (since she was now dead), and a willingness to accept a punishment of "burning in Hell".
- And then there was the man who admitted having killed his baby sister by suffocating her with a plastic bag when he was a little boy. But no one (save his therapist) ever knew that he was the cause of her death, and not the *crib death* explanation that everyone seemed to conclude. He acknowledged that he could not bring himself to tell his parents what really happened out of the fear that the truth would be even more painful to bear, but he admitted "I kind of wish my parents would hear this tape...but I guess they never will."

It's right around here that you realize that all of these people have a need to know that someone else

is listening. It doesn't really matter *who* that someone else is. All that counts is that they don't have to bear the burden by themselves. To know that they are not alone. This becomes painfully clear in the last story, a fifteen-year-old runaway girl. Here is the end of her confession:

"I'm kind of sorry that I left. See, I'm 15 and I saw the number in the newspaper and I had to call.

"You walk around on the street all day long and just looking for someone who just might say, 'Hey, wanna place to go? Come with me; I'll give you food and everything.' And they won't ask for anything back. That's all I want. (You hear a slight sniffle.)

"I guess I've taken too much time up on the tape, but I just gotta talk." And then she hangs up.

It's those last words that hauntingly reverberate after she hangs up the phone. "*I just gotta talk.*" "*I just gotta talk.*" That kind of sums it all up. We have this need to talk. To bare our secrets. To release the cancer of our failures that slowly eats away at us, destroying not our bodies, maybe not even so much our souls, but our humanity. For to be human is to fail. But to hide our flaws, to deny—or even worse, *dismiss*—our sins is to negate our potential for the transcendence from the lower world to that mysterious place awaiting us atop Jacob's ladder.

Why, after all, do we pray? What is the purpose of prayer? Put another way, when we pray—whether in the sanctuary as a member of a community or in moments of solitude and deep introspection—do we have any expectations of response? I don't know about you, but I've never heard anybody talking back. And if I did, I'd be real worried.

Years ago Emanuel Cleaver, the then Mayor of Kansas City—who is also an evangelical minister—was explaining to the UAHC Biennial Convention in Atlanta why he is reluctant to bring his religious beliefs into his public service. "Sometimes when I hear the voice of God," he said, "I have this doubt that maybe it's the voice of Emanuel Cleaver coming in disguise."

Or then there's the story of the man holding perilously onto the edge of a cliff, crying for help. All of a sudden he hears a voice from above: "It's okay. Trust Me. Let go." There's a silence for a moment. Then the man says, "Is there anyone else up there?"

Do we really want God to answer back? What if the answer is "No"? In all seriousness, *what if we spoke to God . . . and God answered?* What if we *could* hear the Voice of God? What would that do to our understanding of God? Would it not transform the holy into the common? And what would it do to our humanity? Would it not destroy any sense of or purpose to religious search? As someone once said, "If finding meant the end of seeking, I'd rather go on seeking." Maybe *our part* of the dialogue is all that matters. Maybe the answer is not merely unimportant, maybe there's not supposed to be a response. Maybe the calling out *completes* the circle, not *begins* it.

The truth is, for us Jews, even as much emphasis as we put on listening, the primary action of the Jew in worship is *speaking*. We do the talking. In fact, the *Shema*—which is the central prayer of Judaism and literally means *to hear*—is supposed to be said *audibly*. The rabbis were very clear about this: unless it is loud enough for your own ears to hear it, you have not fulfilled your obligation of reciting *Shema Yisrael*. You have to say it. And you have to hear it. This, I believe, is especially true when it comes to *viddui*. Confession.

Confession is one of the most essential and integral religious acts of our way of life. Without it, meaningful human life is not possible. This is not to say you can't live without it. It *is* to say that you can't grow without it. And if you can't grow, if you can't *become*, then life is mere existence. Judaism challenges us to do more.

Of course, confession is also the most difficult of human acts. The admission of failure, the shattering of pretense and acceptance of imperfection requires enormous courage. Because the surety of the womb of our *self* is often understood as our last refuge. The one place we can be safe. But Judaism

says otherwise. You are not safe within the confines of your *self*. You are just hiding. Only in God can we find security. And the one clear path to that eternal embrace is to deny our *self*. We do that through *viddui*.

*Ashamnu. Bagadnu. Gazalnu. Dibarnu dofi.* Not to take anything away from *Kol Nidre* or *Avinu Malkeinu* or *Unetaneh Tokef*, there is something magical about this prayer. No doubt the simple melody, the recurring theme resonates within us all. But sometimes I wonder if—as we’re humming along and echoing the Cantor—do we even stop to consider what it is we are doing? For that matter, do any of these prayers shake us up? Do they leave us disturbed? Can words written by another do justice to our own struggles, even if they are evocative and piercing? True *viddui* has to come from within. It has to be our own words. They have to speak truth to us. And they have to move us. In fact, these three aspects are precisely what Isaiah Horowitz, in his text *Shnei Luchot ha-Brit*, said must comprise authentic *viddui* or confession.

The first is that the *viddui* must be audible. Like the *Shema*, you must say it loud enough to hear it. It’s easy to whisper it silently in your heart. No one else has to hear it. Not even yourself. You can say anything you want in your head. The truth is, we all do. If others could hear the thoughts that plague our minds we’d all have to move somewhere else. I don’t even believe that God can hear those thoughts. For them to be real, we have to summon the *ruach* or spirit within and shove it out with the help of our lungs to make a sound. It’s not so easy when even you don’t want to hear what it says. But if you can’t do that, then your *viddui* is nothing more than idle thoughts. They go nowhere. The first stage then is *Viddui*, literally meaning to serve witness. Out loud.

The second part, according to Horowitz, is that it must make you feel bad to say it. *Charata*. If your confession is to be worthy, you must be honest. Brutally honest. You have to tell the truth. And nothing but the truth. On several of those recordings I recounted to you at the outset, the pain of the confessor is unmistakable. That’s what makes them so credible. And powerful. It’s easy to confess the little things. Or to admit to failure but with a caveat. “I was really rotten, but she was worse.” There must be more than just regret, but an awareness that our sin—and that is exactly what we’re talking about here—was bad. It has to hurt to say it loud enough that you can hear it, too.

Which then takes us to the third stage: *Azeva*. A willingness to forsake this failure. Not merely to let go of it but to take an oath to never do it again. In and of itself, this might seem easy. “I promise, I’ll never do it again.” But if you’ve been talking out loud all along, you become increasingly aware of the gravity and seriousness of this primal act of *teshuvah* or genuine turning. If you’ve made it this far, swearing off this evil behavior is no easy feat. Because you’re listening. You’re serving witness to yourself. Almost as if there’s another *you* inside of you paying attention and taking notes.

And that’s the whole point. There *is* this other you. There is this other side within. Call it what you want. *Kol d’mama daka*. The still, small voice. The God that lives inside. The conscience. Superego. But however you identify it, it’s the part that *completes* the cycle. The other half that transforms idle thoughts into spiritual discourse.

Of course, none of this is to be confused with *teshuvah*, with doing repair with another. Confession—*viddui*—is just the first step on the journey to becoming the best possible version of ourselves. And because it’s the first step, it’s the most important. For how can we confess to others what we are unwilling to admit to ourselves?

Can you imagine what it would be like if we all did this at once? Try and imagine how it would feel to be in a room filled with the cacophony of whispering voices revealing their innermost secrets. Imagine what it would sound like. Imagine the sense of togetherness. Of community. Of knowing you are not alone. I see a sanctuary filled with open hearts and bared souls. A sacred space of persons struggling with their humanity. I see prayer.

Maybe at some point today each of us could enter into this sacred dialogue. Maybe at some place where we feel safe we could just stop and articulate the burdens that have been weighing on our souls, not only for the last year but throughout our lives. Maybe we could stop from the routine—if you can

consider any of this day *routine*—and engage in what might be the most spiritual moment of your life. Maybe it will happen here. Maybe in the privacy of your car or even your bathroom. Maybe when you're walking along the way home or when you're about to lie down at night. And maybe you might even muster the courage to do it with someone else. Someone you've offended. That, of course, is the hardest one.

But if you should see others sitting down or walking and their lips are moving but their eyes are closed or unfocused, don't assume that they are crazy or losing touch with reality. On the contrary, it might just be the most lucid and sacred moment of their lives.

The *Apology Line* doesn't exist anymore. It's creator, Alan Bridge died. He was killed in a boating accident. He was hit by a speed boat while he was water skiing. According to observers, the boater slowed down after the collision, looked back, and then sped away. A *hit and run*. His wife—his widow—would later say, "That boater would have been a perfect candidate for the *Apology Line*." But, of course, that is no longer an option.

The truth is, we are all perfect candidates for the *Apology Line*. We all have secrets we need to share. And while there may not be a number into which we can pour out our sins, we still have *Yom Kippur*. For the rest of the day.

May God be with us in the search for our better selves.