

In just a few minutes, we will recite the *Al Chet* prayer out loud and together. Att SOS, we recite this prayer 4 times during the 26 hours of Yom Kippur. We recite it aloud at our Kol Nidre Service, Morning Service, Minchah/Afternoon Service, and a 4th and final time at our Neilah Service. In traditional communities, the Al Chet is recited and repeated 10 times during Yom Kippur. Yes, 10 times. So, it must be a very important prayer.

It is in many ways the centerpiece of the entire YK service.

If you are like me, I often recite prayers on autopilot. Yes, me a rabbi. They don't always pierce my soul. They don't always get under my skin. They don't always make me think or act differently. So, my hope is that by speaking with you about this one prayer, the al chet, by looking at it together both closely and slowly, you and I will not recite the prayer on autopilot. Rather, we can bring it to life --for US as individuals and for us as Jewish community. We can make it meaningful and resonate.

In fact, making the space and time to reflect on things slowly and deliberately is what this 26 hours of Yom Kippur is all about. By creating the space communally to slow down we have the possibility of insights that can lead to profound appreciations and profound changes in our lives. Yes, that is what Yom Kippur is about.

Let's begin by looking at the first sentence of this prayer which we are told to say out loud and together. It contains a WORLD in it.

Al Chet She-ha-tanu lifanecha. For the sin we committed before You.

I have many questions regarding this prayer. Here are a few I want to ask and address this evening?

Why Do We Say this prayer?

What is with the we, I didn't do all these things?

Why do we explicitly say that it is before God?

Why do we recite these lists?

Together, we are reminding and reinforcing what is and is not ethical behavior in Judaism. Our tv shows, our politicians, our newspapers, our facebook feeds, and our instagram accounts definitely do not .

Yet, on Yom Kippur, we come together to remind and reinforce what is ethical behavior in Judaism. As the Israeli American Philosopher Professor Amitai Etzioni writes, “ **the moral character of individuals tends to degrade over time unless that character is continually and communally reinforced.**” **ON YK we communally reinforce our moral code.** Perhaps, by reciting these lists of chets/sins, we are reminding ourselves what we consider moral, ethical, and right behavior. Yom Kippur’s recitation and repetition of the AL Chet prayer reinforces our moral infrastructure.

Al Chet **She-heh-tanu** Lifanecha / For the sin **we committed** before You!

She-heh-tanu / Whats with the we? I didn't do it!

Throughout Jewish history, the idea and the core value that Jews are responsible for one another is pervasive. There is a Hebrew expression for this: *Kol Yizrael Arezim zeh b'zeh*. All of Israel is Responsible for One Another.

Millions of Jews around the world are alive today because other Jews - who never had set eyes upon them but felt a sense of kinship toward them as fellow Jews - reached out to save them, or their ancestors, during times of persecution. Even in our lifetime, the successful movements to save Soviet Jews & Ethiopian Jews relied on this deeply felt feeling of mutual responsibility.

***Kol Yizrael Arezim zeh b'zeh*. All of Israel is Responsible for One Another has saved more lives than any other Jewish value I can think of.**

When I was growing up, my grandma, Grandma Harriet used to get excited when the news told a positive story about a Jew. Conversely, she would be horrified when a Jew did something bad. she 'd said, "it was a Shanda for the Jews." Being Jewish, by its very nature, is being part of a community. Judaism by its very nature is communal.

“The soul reckoning that we do on Yom Kippur is **communal**,” writes Rabbi Caryn Broitman. “ We are all implicated in the personal acts, good or bad, of any individual in our community. The communal issue is not shame or guilt, it is instead responsibility. And that is ultimately collective, for wrongs are perpetrated and perpetuated only with the consent of the many, even if that consent is passive.”

Our tradition goes even further.

If one Jew sees another Jew on the verge of sinning, he has an obligation to step in and help. (Of course, how and when is an art form!) This is not the case with our hyper-individualist American Culture in which Your biz is your biz and my biz is my Biz. That simply is NOT the Jewish way.

The 16th c. Kabbalist, Rabbi Luria, shared this idea in a beautiful mystical fashion. He taught that the people of Israel may be likened to a body in which every Jew is a living part. The vitality of the whole depends upon the health of every organ and limb. That is how deeply we are connected the one to the other. Each individual sin inflicts harm on the whole organism. All share responsibility for healing the body of Israel.

Al Chet Shechatanu L'Fanecha / For the sin we committed **before You!**

Why do we say before GOD. The chets we list are almost all between individuals: dishonesty in business, adultery, gossip, arrogance.

In our tradition, God is omnipresent. At a Jewish wedding, we say *Bruchim Ha'bayyim be shem adonai*. Blessed is your being here in the name of God. We say ***Ain Makom pah-new-ee, min ha'shekeena***. There is no place from which Gods presence is absent.

Allow me to share a story told to me by my Rabbinic Mentor. Its a story he shared with me when I was in rabbinical school in NYC.

There was a very prominent and respected couple In the community. This couple were *machers* in the community and cared deeply what others thought of them.

The wife asked to meet with the rabbi and shared that her husband was very verbally abusive. What to do? The rabbi asked to have the husband come and meet with him the following week. When meeting with the husband, the rabbi suggested that for the next month, the couple install a video camerra in their house with a feed to the rabbi's study. Perhaps concerned what the rabbi would think of him, the husbands behavior changed for the better week by week.

After a month, the couple returned to the rabbi's study as scheduled. The rabbi congratulated the husband on the progress he had made. The rabbi told them they could now throw away the video camera. The rabbi also shared, "Your behavior changed for the better. Perhaps, you were concerned what I would think of you. Yet, had not been concerned what the Judge of Judges was thinking of you. The Eternal is a witness to our lives. When we hurt one another, we are also doing damage to God" With that the couple left.

How would we behave differently in our homes, places of work, conversations with friends and families, if we felt that the Judge of Judges was present, watching and caring??????

Ain Mahkom P'nui men ha'shekeenah- There is no place without God's presence!

CONCLUSION

Friends, we have these 25 hours to be honest with ourselves and with the Eternal. We can acknowledge and confess our wrongdoings. We can confess and acknowledge our character flaws, flaws that have caused damage. And, we can change.. We can do teshuvah. We can do and be better people

The divine image is in each and everyone of us. Our Chet/Sin distorts and diminishes that divine image.

Over these next 25 hours, on this Yom Kippur, our Sabbath of Sabbath, Our Most Holy of Days, I pray that the words of the *Al Chet* will resonate in your heart. I pray it will call to your awareness what needs to be healed. I pray you will be inspired to make positive change.

Let the divinity in you that is now encumbered be released in all its glory.