

With Truth & Compassion
Kol Nidre 5769

In this moment, we are about to enter into our first period of silent prayer and reflection, the first of many Amidah prayers over the course of Yom Kippur. Yom Kippur is always a fragile time, a time to reconcile with the ephemeral nature of our lives. We sit with awareness of the twists and turns of life that we may not foresee. This Yom Kippur, the world around us seems a bit more fragile and perilous than usual.

In the midst of this awareness, we are challenged to take stock of ourselves. In the private, silent Amidah that we are about to begin, we encounter our first Selikhot prayers. These prayers are expressions of honest acknowledgment, of beginning a process of looking into those areas of our lives where we know we can do better. The first of the Selikhot prayers, the *Ashamnu*, is an alphabetical acrostic, and the *Al Heyt* is alphabetical as well. The format of the acrostic gives a sense of completion. While not every possible misdeed is listed here, the sense of “A to Z” allows us to feel that we have taken a real inventory of our actions. As we go through these lists, there is a custom of tapping ourselves on our chests, as a way of really taking in what we are saying.

While these lists can seem a bit daunting, these confessional acrostics are not here to overwhelm us. The reality is that I, that we, have not necessarily committed all of these transgressions. The lists are here to help us in our reflection on where we’ve gone wrong and where we might do better. We are invited to add our own personal “*al hey*”s as we go through the list. What have I done, or failed to do, that does not appear here?

The great irony of Yom Kippur is that, even with the repeated listing of possible sins, with the deep introspection we are encouraged to do over this next 25 hours—even with all this, we also know that on some level, we are already forgiven.

At the very beginning of the service, in the verses (excerpts from the book of Numbers) that follow the chanting of *Kol Nidre*, we are essentially told that forgiveness has already been granted: *Vayomer Adonai, salakhti kid’varekha*; “Adonai said: I have forgiven, as you ask.” And throughout the Yom Kippur liturgy, we encounter images of God as the Source of Compassion, *El rachum v’chanun*. We extol the power of love, of forgiveness, of compassion, throughout this day. What, then, is the teaching here? How can we be told, at one and the same time, to repeatedly recount our transgressions, and to also know that we’re already forgiven?

I see here an invitation to each of us to be compassionate—primarily towards ourselves. It is hard work, to look truthfully at our lives, to see our shortcomings, our misdeeds, the places we have failed to live up to our own expectations. Without a deep sense of compassion for ourselves, we just can’t do this work. It’s too frightening, too hard. Without compassion, we will either deny our shortcomings, for fear of our own harsh judgment, or we will beat ourselves up to no good end. We will end up feeling helpless and hopeless, mired in a sense of failure.

This balance of *emet* and *rachamim*, of truth and compassion, is our challenge this evening, this Yom Kippur. These lists of *hatta'im*, of transgressions and sins, is a daunting list—who wouldn't feel overwhelmed going through this, really feeling the hurt I've caused? The power of compassion is such that it allows me to be with this truth, to sit with the reality of my own failures, without becoming either overwhelmed or defensive.

There is an immediate and natural reaction, when we think of something we've done wrong, to push it away, to hold it at arm's length. It is counter-intuitive to draw it in close. But if we are able to do that, we will suffer much less. Avoidance takes an enormous amount of energy, and usually stirs up all kinds of corollary feelings of aversion—self-judgment, denial, shame.

When I can bring something close, can hold it compassionately as if I am holding a recalcitrant child, the edge disappears. The truth doesn't disappear, but by bringing it close, I can see that truth more clearly, without distortion. I can see it, and say to myself, "I did this, and that was not a good way to act. It was unwholesome; it caused suffering to another, perhaps to myself." I can resolve to do better next time. And then I can let it go.

And that, ultimately, is what the act of forgiveness is—the act of letting go. Acknowledging the truth, embracing that truth, committing to do better—and then letting go. It's a brilliant move in the liturgy to have us play out this act of letting go, in the voice of God, right at the beginning of the service: *V'salakhti kid'varekha*—I have forgiven, as you asked. Now we get to practice it, tonight, tomorrow, for the next 25 hours. To acknowledge, embrace, resolve, and let go. Acknowledge, embrace, resolve, and let go.

My colleague and teacher, Rabbi Richard Hirsh, says that we come together on Yom Kippur to be alone. And that is one of the gifts of this day. There is work that each of us needs to do that we can only do alone, that requires us to sit here with ourselves, with our own internal reality. But we do this alone work together. We stand and sit in silence together; we are supported by the knowledge that others are doing this work alongside us. And if we approach it right, we create a container of compassion for ourselves and for one another.

We began this evening by declaring that it is permissible for us to pray together, that "we accept into our midst whoever seeks to pray, whether righteous or unrighteousness." And who among us is fully righteous? So we accept ourselves, we accept one another, in order *l'hitpallel*—translated here as "to pray," but meaning, more literally, "taking account of oneself."

So, with compassion, with open hearts, may we enter into the silence, and discover what we need to discover, and hold it close, and then let it go.