

Why Don't We Change?  
Kol Nidre, 2019, 5780

In 1993, an inexplicable 26 years ago, the movie *Groundhog Day* premiered. The premise of the movie was that the main character, Phil Connors, a weatherman played by Bill Murray, was covering Groundhog Day in the small town of Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania, and he was not happy about it. He is not particularly kind to those around him, and at the end of the day, a blizzard keeps him stuck in Punxsutawney. When his alarm goes off the next morning, it's the same day over again. As the plot unfolds, Phil Connors realizes that he is repeating the same day, over and over and over again, but that it doesn't repeat for anyone else; they're all living it for the first time. Figuring out that there are no consequences for what he does on Groundhog Day, he tries to get out of this seemingly endless loop, attempting to kill himself in different ways and engaging in all kinds of self-destructive behavior. None of it works. Eventually, he turns to try doing good instead, using his knowledge of the day's events to prevent tragedies, learning new skills, and finally really getting to know his coworkers. Sometimes, Yom Kippur feels a little bit like Groundhog Day. We show up, we get hungry, we say the words we said last year, we go home and eat. Nothing changes.

Every year, without change, we face the Yom Kippur liturgy's unique section, Vidui, confession. The beginning of this section of our service is the Ashamnu. We sing a catchy tune, beat our chests, and "confess" to an alphabetical list of sins that most of us didn't do—in Hebrew or in the English version. "We steal. We devise evil. We commit crimes" (MHN p. 82). Yes, some of us do these things, and yes, some of the sins on the list are less drastic. But most of them are impersonal and irrelevant to us; we tune out instead, going through the motions instead of really repenting for the things we *have* done.

The second part of our Yom Kippur confession is what we refer to as the *Al Chet*, literally, "about the sin." The way this prayer is worded in our machzor, we talk about "*al chet shechatanu l'fanecha*," 'the sin we have committed before You...' Some of these sins are interpersonal in nature. Some are personal and individual. But the fact that we frame them as sins we commit before You, God, makes them primarily between us and God. That makes so many of us intensely uncomfortable, or it just shuts us down and makes these prayers empty words. They were empty words last year, though; haven't we changed? I can't stand here and recite platitudes, again. I can't stand here and convince any of us to change our beliefs in God, either. I can remind us to consider that there are other ways of conceiving of God, to remind all of us—myself included—that the God we rejected when we were 12 years old isn't the only way to conceive of God. That image, and the difficult to understand liturgy, keep us reliving the same Yom Kippur, year in and year out.

In an interview with *Groundhog Day* director Harold Ramis,<sup>1</sup> he recalled that opening weekend of the movie, he was surprised to see people walking around outside the theater with picket signs. They weren't protesting. They were agreeing with the premise of the movie. The signs read, "Are you living the same day over and over again?" It turns out that they were traditional Jews, but he reveals in the interview that in the weeks after the movie premiered, he heard from people of every religion, meditation and yoga gurus, psychiatrists, and all of them thought the movie was rooted in their tradition. Right now, it's not February 2, Groundhog Day, but 10 Tishrei, Atonement Day, and year in and year out, we are living this day again and again.

We can break the endless loop. We can break the loop by being more realistic about how we relate to other people; we can break the loop by changing the words we use in prayer. We beat our chests, we confess our communal sins, even the ones that we as individuals did not commit. We use ancient language—not just Hebrew, but the specific Hebrew sins that were settled on for our machzor long, long ago. Rabbi Charles Middleburgh wrote about his feelings when his congregation got new machzors, noting that the updated translations were so much more resonant for him—although by now, even those updates are somewhat outdated. "Where the traditional text spoke of 'throwing off your yoke,' [our new machzor] spoke of 'defying the moral law'; where the text once described 'wronging a neighbor,' [it now] had 'harming our fellow men in any way.' Perhaps these changes are subtle, but especially to those not steeped in the traditional idiom language of prayer, they spark an instant comprehension of the sin involved, rather than requiring a pause for puzzlement or questioning, for neither of which the context allows time."<sup>2</sup> We have to consider other updates or additions. How about: We're dramatic. We're fake. We gossip. We're self-righteous. We're selfish. We're self-absorbed. If the words aren't meaningful to us, we can't mean them. The danger of our prayers of confession being too generic is the same as when our apologies are too generic.

During our Yom Kippur morning confession, we also make time for personal confessions, those things we keep to ourselves or between ourselves and God. The text of these confessions, if we are guided by the machzor, are mostly personal offenses, those between ourselves and...ourselves. This silent time is vital to our prayers, but how many of us use it to count how many pages are left in the service, or to skim the words on the page, or to chat quietly with the person next to us. Instead, we need to do it differently this year. We need to use that silent confession time to...silently confess, and the machzor can guide us. Use those section headings as a map. If one of the statements jumps out, let it. Stick with that one and really think about it. There are no prizes for finishing reading—skimming—the page before the

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<sup>1</sup> <https://youtu.be/BkEUypmTanA>

<sup>2</sup> Rabbi Charles H. Middleburgh, PhD, "From Staid Sins of Yesteryear to Wrongdoings of Today" in *Ashamnu and Al Chet, We Have Sinned: Sin and Confession in Judaism*, page 129.

music starts. The real prize is in examining our own souls, and apologizing to ourselves for what we did and wish we hadn't done, or what we didn't do and wish we had done.

As we apologize to ourselves, we also apologize, sometimes half-heartedly, to others. We've all seen the blanket apologies some people make online, and many of us have probably made them. "If I've done anything to offend you in the last year, I'm sorry. Please forgive me." The thing is, that's not how Yom Kippur works. If I've offended you, you shouldn't shoulder the burden of forgiveness, especially without my even knowing I did anything wrong. Consider the difference with an apology like "If I've done anything to offend you in the last year, and I didn't even realize it, please reach out. I'd like to make it right." Even better, of course, is not taking shortcuts. Blanket apologies aren't the idea of this season. The real work of Yom Kippur where it concerns interpersonal relationships is in the direct conversations. Apology expert Marjorie Ingall, writer for Tablet Magazine and founder of [sorrywatch.com](http://sorrywatch.com), says that the word "if" doesn't belong in an apology.<sup>3</sup> Consider the difference: "Have I done anything to offend you?" Or even better, "How have I offended you or upset you? I am embarrassed that I didn't know you were upset, offended, or bothered by my words or actions. Now that I know, I'd like to make it right. I will work on that."

The Talmud teaches, "everything is in the hands of heaven, except the fear of heaven" (Niddah 16b, Berachot 33b, cited in *We Have Sinned*, 142). According to a traditional view of God, everything is foreseen and perhaps preordained—except for moral choices. "Whatever we believe or do not believe about God today, the conviction that moral choice, ethical behavior, is our responsibility remains the focus of the Yom Kippur service...We can and do make moral choices; we can and do bear responsibility for our own deeds and for those of our community and society."

When we pray the words, "*al chet shechatanu l'fanecha*," 'for the sin we have committed before You,' we should all be remembering that we have to work to change, to repair, our relationships with God, too. Our own relationships with God are intensely personal, but that we *have* relationships with God, that we work on those relationships, that we figure out what we want those relationships to look like—that's how we commit to real change this Yom Kippur. That's how we ensure that we won't be standing here next year, mindlessly parroting the same words.

In the interview with *Groundhog Day* director Harold Ramis, who grew up Jewish in Chicago, he compares the movie to the Torah (and then he apologizes for making that comparison). He said that Torah doesn't change, but we do, so we read it again and again to find new meaning in the same words. Similarly, Bill Murray's character has to experience the same day over and over again, perhaps until he sufficiently changes.

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<sup>3</sup> I'm Sorry episode of Unorthodox podcast

Change is hard, and it's not always what we think—or what we want. Academics and business researchers Chip Heath and Dan Heath write in *Switch: How to Change Things When Change is Hard*, “For anything to change, someone has to start acting differently” (page 4). It seems obvious, but if we simply recognize the need for change, without deciding on an action to change, nothing happens. When we don't know what the next step is, we don't change. The words of our prayers are a part of our tradition and our people, much like the faults we hate in ourselves are also part of ourselves. We try to change, it's just not so easy to do—for liturgy or for personal goals. We aren't the same as we were last year. When we pray, we shouldn't be just going through the motions. This year, we want real change. We don't have to wait until after the holiday to change, until the next time we face a challenge. We need to change how we pray, now, tonight.

Changing ourselves is hard! We have a limited amount of self-control, a finite ability to make conscious changes. That means that unconscious, automatic actions are much easier. When we don't have a specific plan for different actions, we don't always remember to do them. More people successfully quit smoking or break other addictions when they are away from home, because they are not surrounded by their usual triggers for the behavior (*Switch*). The Talmud knew this too, and said, “a change of one's place of residence cancels an evil judgment,”<sup>4</sup> citing God's telling Abraham to go to a new land as proof. To change our own habits or behaviors, we need to add triggers for our actions by making specific plans. Bill Murray's character in *Groundhog Day* stepped in the same puddle for so many repetitions of Groundhog Day, because he didn't make a plan to avoid it. We need to learn from his inaction, to plan for our own successful change, not just pray for it.

Research on change (*Switch*) says that we have to address both logic and emotion when we are making changes. Logic dictates that our next step has to be specific. Emotion prescribes that it has to be attainable and that the person making the change has to feel its importance. Change doesn't happen just because we want it to, or just because we plan it out. It takes an investment of both emotion and logic, or we will end up right back here, on the same holiday, with the same feelings, and the same words next year.

Rabbi Israel Salanter, a nineteenth century Lithuanian rabbi, was a founder of the Mussar movement, which advocates for greater focus on ethical Judaism. According to mussar, relationships—with others and with oneself—are as important as ritual laws of Judaism. Rabbi Salanter wrote: “When I was a young man, I wanted to change the world. I found it was difficult to change the world, so I tried to change my nation. When I found I couldn't change the nation, I began to focus on my own town. I couldn't change the town and as an older man, I tried to change my family. Now, as an old man, I realize the only thing I can change is myself, and suddenly, I realize that if long ago I had changed myself, I could have made an impact on my

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<sup>4</sup> Rosh Hashanah 16b

family. My family and I could have made an impact on our town. Their impact could have changed the nation and I could indeed have changed the world.” He didn’t write these words specifically about Yom Kippur—but he could have. We start with changing ourselves: the words we speak in prayer, the way we approach change itself.

We aren’t the same as we were a year ago. We have another year of experiences. We’ve been through changes, adventures, joys, sorrows, struggles since last Yom Kippur. So there is no reason that we should approach prayers the same way we did last year, or that we should walk in here next year and feel the same way. This year, may we commit to change. May we consider where we’ve come from, the words we’ve spoken, the actions we’ve done and not done. May we pull ourselves out of the endless repetition of days, and may we become the changes we seek.