

Making the Invisible Visible

Yom Kippur Night 5779

I.

IN HER BOOK *THE UPSIDE OF STRESS*, Stanford psychologist Kelly McGonigal describes an exercise called “making the invisible visible.” Everyone in the room is asked to write on a slip of paper “something they have struggled with and that continues to affect them now, but that no one would know just looking at them.”

After they have all been written the slips are placed in a bag, which is then passed around the room. Each person pulls out an anonymous slip of paper and reads it out loud, as though it is their own. “I am in so much physical pain right now, it is hard for me to stay in this room.” “My only daughter died ten years ago.” “I am a recovering alcoholic, and I still want a drink every day.”

And Dr. McGonigal describes two valuable goals that emerge from the exercise. The first is that, by having a random person read out an anonymous slip of paper in the first person, the struggle read out becomes the struggle of the person reading it, to quote McGonigal: “[it] seems as though it could truly be his or her own truth.” And second, it makes everyone in the group realize that, for all that they are struggling with, they are not alone. Whenever we face challenges in life we come to think of our issue as unique – that no one else is dealing with something as bad. But hearing the issues of others, and reading them out loud, creates a sense of, to use the phrase used by McGonigal, “common humanity.”

II.

One of the biggest mistakes we think about tonight is that it revolves around *Kol Nidre*. It doesn't help that we call tonight “*Kol Nidre* Night,” but the truth is that, compared to the other things we do in this service, *Kol Nidre* pales in comparison. In particular to our recitation of *vidui*, our confession.

At the end of our silent *Amidah*, beginning on page 104, we will recite a lengthy list of sins for which we are all guilty. First, we will recite the alphabetical *Ashamnu* confession, which lists 24 general sins. Following which we will confess to 44 more specific sins, before ending with a catch-all list of nine penalties that we would have incurred in Temple times based on the sins we committed.

The point of these lists, as is so often the point with rote prayer, is to serve as a springboard – in this case for reflecting on our failures this past year. The point is to go through each sin and think of how it applies to an action or aspect of ours this past year that we regret: be it one where we transgressed the will of God or hurt a fellow human being. And, if you want – and I recommend doing it at some point over Yom Kippur – you can turn to page 881 in the back of the *machzor*, where Artscroll have a more elaborate explanation and exegesis of each sin, where their explanations become so general for a specific sin that you can't not have violated it.

The point of this silent confession is its privacy. The ability to stand before God alone and confess those parts of my life that are otherwise kept far from everyone is powerful. It's painful to have to

stare at myself so keenly in the mirror, but there is something potent in having an opportunity to finally confront my demons. *Ashamnu* ceases to become just one word in a fixed text and becomes the medium through which I must reckon with my darkest moments and my greatest shames.

III.

All of this changes, however, during the end of the service today, and at the end of all the *Chazzan's* Repetitions for all the other services tomorrow. Because we repeat the confession again, only this time publicly, only this time in unison. Suddenly, those parts of the *Amidah* that reveal my inner shame, that unlock those parts of my past year I try to keep locked away, are recited publicly before all. As I confessed *גולנו בגדנו, אשמנו* – to having been guilty, to having betrayed, to having robbed – during my silent *Amidah*, as they gained new meaning, new resonance, that had all been private. But now, my sins, my shame, my regret are on display, being recited by all: the invisible has become visible. Why? Why take our private confessions and air them before all after having been brought so low by them only moments before? Why have everyone else in the room recite them, too? These were my confessions but now I hear everyone else saying them!

I think the answer lies along similar axes to Kelly McGonigal's insights: the public recitation of our private confession is both humbling and encouraging. We're wired as humans to judge others, to always be looking at the flaws in others while ignoring or excusing our own. Particularly in the religious sphere, we can all too easily spend our time judging those who are less observant than ourselves, blissfully unaware of the irony that we, ourselves, are not as observant as we should be. And this can really reach its peak on Yom Kippur.

You'll notice that the confession is always in the plural: you never say *גולתי בגדתי, אשמתי* – I have been guilty, I have betrayed, I have robbed, but *גולנו בגדנו, אשמנו* – we have been guilty, we have betrayed, we have robbed. But in your silent *Amidah* you're supposed to ignore that fact. You should see it as a quirk of prayer. The point is not to say *גולנו*, we have stolen, and be thinking "I didn't steal, but he did. Yeah, 'we' stole, but really it was him." But the truth is that Yom Kippur brings out that attitude all too easily.

And so, everyone in the room, those less observant than you, those you deem less kind and considerate than you, those you feel are just not as good a human being as you, read out the list of *your* sins. As you identified painfully with *גולנו בגדנו, אשמנו* in your private *Amidah*, you must now realize everyone else knows it, too. The slip of paper upon which you wrote the deepest, darkest parts of your life is now being read before you – anonymously – by those you considered less than you. There is nothing more humbling.

But it is also encouraging. Because, for all our failures, for all our mistakes over the past year, it is encouraging to know that we are surrounded by others who failed, too. Because we are also reading everyone else's private confessions aloud at the same time our own are being read by others. For all the shame we felt during our confession, it is good to know that there are others. Just like me, there are others in this world who know what it is to feel shame. It is our common failures that unite us.

IV.

At the beginning of the service tonight, before we said *Kol Nidre*, our *baal tefillah* recited three times a fascinating text that permitted the sinners to pray in this service: אנו מתירין להתפלל עם העבוינים. If you had thought that referred to others in the room, the public confession tonight will grant you the necessary humility for the rest of the day. But if, as it was being said, you lowered your head realizing it was talking about you, then have no worry, as you will learn during public confession you are among עבוינים, sinners, here. And together all of us will receive forgiveness as we begin our service for the holiest day of the year.