

Yom Kippur: Vidui

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Each year, the *al-cheit* insertion into our Shemoneh Esrei is the time during our *tefillah* where we take a step back and articulate many of the sins that we might have committed over the past year.

The Rambam in *Perek Bet* (Chapter 2) of *Hilchot Teshuvah* provides a detailed explanation of the exact process of *teshuvah*:

What is repentance? The sinner shall cease sinning, and remove sin from his thoughts, and wholeheartedly conclude not to revert back to it, It is, moreover, essential that his confession shall be by spoken words of his lips, and all that which he concluded in his heart shall be formed in speech.

וימה היא התשובה?
הוא שיעזב החוטא
החטא ויסירו
ממחשבתו ויגמר בלבו
שלא יעשהו עוד וצריך
להתנדות בשפתיו
ולומר ענינות אלו
שגמר בלבו:

In this *halacha*, the Rambam states that beyond the mental commitment to stay away from a particular sin, one must also admit by mouth that which he has stated in his heart. It is not only enough to acknowledge it internally, but one must explicitly verbalize the sin as well. In addition, the Rambam explains that a person who only admits it verbally, but does not commit in his heart to change, is likened to a person whom after becoming ritually impure from a holding a bug, attempts to immerse in a ritual bath, a *mikvah*, while still holding the bug. The only way this individual can rid himself of this ritual impurity is by letting go of the source of the impurity, the bug. The parallel here is clear - in order to fulfill the mitzvah of *teshuvah*, once must completely abandon the sin, and let go of the bug - the sin.

This comment of the Rambam provides us with guidance as to how exactly we must approach the lengthy lists of sins appearing in the *al cheit* prayer. The detailed *al cheit* presents us with the opportunity to verbally admit our sins, but that should not be enough - we must also make a mental commitment in our minds and hearts to not return to that action.

In *Orot HaTeshuvah*, Chapter 5, Rav Kook explains that true *teshuvah* has the potential to remove our blinders, *l'hasir davar hachotzeits me'al ha'ayin* - to remove that which covers the eye from the eye. With the removal of each sin through *teshuvah*, an entire field of vision is open to the individual - of what his/her potential is and how he/she can improve. When we engage in proper *teshuvah*, worlds are opened to us, worlds that we can tap into with our newfound sight. When we utilize the *al cheit* lists as a springboard for areas of improvement, and we commit ourselves to working on the sins that are enumerated in them we open ourselves up to new potential and possibilities.

Carol Dweck, a famous psychologist, coined the important term "growth mindset." People who possess a growth mindset believe that they can improve with hard work, and that their most basic and simplistic abilities can be improved through hard work. When it comes to *teshuvah*, a person must possess a growth mindset - a belief that one can grow through one's effort and work.

The *al cheit tefillah* is the time in our prayer where we begin to do the work. Hopefully we've taken time during the month of Elul to begin this process, but for many of us, standing and reciting this *tefillah* on Yom Kippur when we don't have access to much of the material things that distract us daily, is the time when we truly begin to reflect. It is a time where we take a step back and we list all the potential sins that we might

have done over the past year. The scaffolding of our *nussach hatefillah* (the prayer formula) provides us with a window to reexamine our past year through real-life examples. Instead of racking our brains to identify things we may have done wrong, our *tefillah* acknowledges that many people commit these particular sins and challenges us to think about what our personal connection to them might be. There are many tools and guides that have been produced by multiple organizations, including the OU, to help spark one's mind in formulating personal connections and regrets. This is due to the fact that some of the sins listed in the *al cheit* prayer require understanding and explanation. Not all have an obvious connection to our lives and taking some time before Yom Kippur to think and connect these *tefillot* to our actions may be helpful to your prayer experience. The Gemara in *Maseches Brachos* tells us that the Chassidim Rishonim used to prepare an hour before praying each morning to ready themselves for the *tefillah* experience. This same idea must apply to our recitation of *al cheit* - we must ready ourselves in advance so that our *tefillah* is a productive step in our *teshuvah* journey.

Rav Aharon Lichtenstein z"l explained in a *teshuvah drasha* that *viddui* contains two kinds of confessions. He states "there are those which are themselves sins, and others which are not inherently sins, but are either areas of experience or activity within which the sin takes place, or a kind of quality or mind-set which attends upon the sin." When examining many of the lines of the *al cheit tefillah*, one can fit each example into these categories:

- *Ma'achal ve'mishteh*, an action
- *Neshech u'marbit*, taking interest is an action, feelings of the heart - is a mindset upon which sins take place.

Understanding that our sins fall into these categories can deepen our understanding as to why our *teshuvah* process must be both an expression of the soul and an expression of the mouth. Our sins are manifestations of both our physical being and our mental/emotional being,

and so our *teshuvah* process must reflect both of those dimensions as well.

Rav Lichtenstein's explanation to a particular *al cheit*, that of *al cheit shechatanu lefanecha bivli da'at*, the sin we committed in front of You without knowledge, I believe can provide us with a deeper understanding into the rest of the *al cheit* prayer as well.

Rav Lichtenstein explains that *bivli da'at*, can be understood in two ways. "Some, perhaps most, would be inclined to understand it in the second sense [that of mindset]: it is that which enables us to be sinners. We were not sufficiently heedful, and as a result a particular sin ensued." In other words, this statement - asking for forgiveness for a lack of knowledge, encompasses all of our sins as it is this lack of knowledge that serves as a precursor to so many of the other sins that we commit. As we enter a new year, mindfulness and thought are tools that can help us become the best versions of ourselves.

Rav Lichtenstein offers a second approach, explaining that perhaps *bivli da'at*, is itself a sin, perhaps it fits into the first category. "A certain mindlessness is a failing in as much as we do not then fully realize the *tzelem Elokim* (image of God) within us, the *tzelem Elokim* that provides us with the knowledge that makes us human. Quite apart from that, inasmuch as the *bivli da'at*, the lack of focus and concentration, defines our relationship to God, we are not "perpetually dwelling upon God. When some quantitative or qualitative *shikhecha*, forgetfulness, intrudes, then *bivli da'at* is a sin in its own right."

He continues, "That being the case, the *teshuvah* which is specifically incumbent upon us is the *teshuvah* of return, of narrowing the distance, of no longer forgetting, of intensifying our awareness, of bridging the gap." When we examine the *al cheit tefillah* we do just that, we intensify our awareness to focus on our misgivings and our mistakes. We tune into that which we did wrong; we utilize our *da'at* to

highlight our own mistakes with the purpose of bridging the distance between us and *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* by returning towards Him through our *teshuvah*. May this Yamim Noraim season be one of *da'at*, of mindfulness, of reflection that allows you to take steps closer towards HaKadosh Baruch Hu through the process of *teshuvah*, both of soul and body.