

Tomorrow, I am going to stand here and lie to God.

And so are most of you.

It's right there in the prayer book.

Ashamnu.

We have sinned.

Bagadnu.

We have betrayed.

Betrayed? Nah, I haven't betrayed anyone.

Gazalnu.

We have stolen.

Stolen? No way.

I haven't stolen anything.

Later we'll get to the Al Chet, and the list gets even more ambitious.

For the sin we have committed through dishonesty.

All right. Maybe.

For the sin we have committed through gossip.

Let's keep moving.

For the sin we have committed through arrogance.

I'm sure that applies to somebody.

And then we get to things like bribery.

Bribery?

Now come on.

I know this congregation pretty well.

I am willing to believe we have some gossip.

Probably a respectable amount of arrogance.

But bribery?

I would wager most of you have not committed the sin of bribery this year.

And yet tomorrow we are all going to stand here and confess to it.

Which raises a slightly uncomfortable question:

Why does the holiest day of the Jewish year ask me to confess dishonestly?

[Pause.]

If confession is supposed to be honest, shouldn't I confess the things that I did?

And shouldn't you confess the things that you did?

Why am I saying words for sins that may have nothing whatsoever to do with me?

Which leads me to something I've been giving a lot of thought to. This year, being my first year as your rabbi, I've decided we should try something different. Rather than confessing to everything, I've created a comprehensive checklist, and we will go around, and each of you will publicly announce the sins that you have committed from my checklist. If there are any in dispute, we can negotiate those. After all, we are Jewish.

Pause.

Just kidding. You should see the look on some of your faces.

So, no we're not going to do that.

And actually, the machzor gives us something much more interesting . One very small yet very important word.

We.

Ashamnu.

Not: I have sinned.

We have sinned.

Bagadnu.

Not: I have betrayed.

We have betrayed.

Gazalnu.

We have stolen.

The entire confession is written in the plural.

And that is not an accident.

There is an ancient Jewish teaching:

Kol Yisrael arevim zeh bazeh.

All Israel is responsible for one another.

Usually, we hear that as something beautiful.

We take care of one another.

When someone is hungry, we feed them.

When someone is grieving, we sit beside them.

But it's really more than that.

If I am connected **to** you when you're hurting, I can't suddenly declare myself disconnected **from** you when you do something wrong.

Yom Kippur doesn't let me look across the room and say:

That one belongs to him.

Not my sin.

Not my problem.

Now, that doesn't mean I am guilty of everything another person does.

And it doesn't mean that we don't have personal responsibility for the sins we do commit.

Of course not.

Judaism takes individual responsibility very seriously.

But perhaps "I didn't do it" isn't always the end of the moral question.

Maybe I didn't say the cruel thing.

But did I laugh?

Maybe I didn't spread the gossip.

But did I enjoy hearing it?

Maybe I wasn't the person who excluded someone.

But did I notice them standing alone?

Maybe I didn't start the argument.

But did I keep it going long after I could have stopped?

There is a difference between guilt and responsibility.

I am not guilty of everything that happens around me.

But I do bear some responsibility for the kind of family, the kind of community, the kind of world that my presence helps create.

Even when we're not the ones instigating the transgression, we do bear responsibility for our reaction or lack thereof.

Maybe that is one reason Judaism makes us say:

We.

[Pause.]

But there's another possibility. Maybe some of those sins I was so quick to cross off the list...shouldn't have been crossed off quite so easily.

We become surprisingly talented Talmudists rationalising our behaviour when our own innocence is at stake.

"Gossip? I wasn't gossiping. I know her, she wouldn't care." Everyone's talking about it.

"Dishonesty? I didn't actually say anything untrue."

"Cruelty? I was being direct."

"Arrogance? I can't help it if I'm always right.

We can create rationalizations the rabbis never dreamed of.

And whenever we do something we are not particularly proud of, we have context.

So much context.

I was tired.

I was under pressure.

You don't know what he said first.

It had been a very difficult week.

And anyway, have you met her?

We are remarkably talented lawyers for ourselves.

We know every mitigating circumstance.

We know why this situation was different.

We know why our intentions matter more than the outcome.

We know why, technically, this particular line of the AI Chet does not apply to us.

If Yom Kippur gave us boxes to check, most of us could probably arrive at Neilah completely innocent.

So Judaism doesn't give us boxes.

It gives us the words.

And asks us to say them.

Maybe because Yom Kippur is not particularly interested in the case I can make for myself.

[Pause.]

...Most of us came here tonight with a fairly reassuring opinion of ourselves.

We are good people.

And I think most of us probably are.

We love our families.

We help people.

We give tzedakah.

We show up.

We try to be decent.

We try not to hurt anyone.

But Yom Kippur does not ask:

Are you a good person?

Because that question is surprisingly easy to answer.

Usually yes.

Especially if we get to choose the comparison.

Yom Kippur asks something much less comfortable.

Where were you generous?

And where were you selfish?

Where were you courageous?

And where did you look away?

Where did you tell the truth?

And where did you allow something untrue to stand because it was easier?

Where did you live according to the person you believe yourself to be?

And where didn't you?

Someone else's wrongdoing is not evidence of my righteousness.

I cannot become good simply by finding someone worse.

And so tomorrow, Judaism will not give the good people one prayer book and the bad people another.

We all get the same one.

We all say the same words.

....We.

[Pause.]

But there is something else about that word that I had never really thought about.

And I think it changes the entire confession.

I have been asking:

Why should I have to confess your sins?

But tomorrow, when we stand here together, something else will also be happening.

You will be confessing mine.

[Long pause.]

Tomorrow, someone in this room is going to reach a line in the Al Chet and feel something tighten inside them.

Most of us will keep reading.

We won't notice.

The person sitting beside them may not know.

Their spouse may not know.

Their closest friend may not know.

But for them, they are back in that moment. Back in that room. Back in that conversation. Back in that night they did it.

Maybe they can still see the others persons face. And for that moment these ancient words aren't ancient anymore.

That one is mine.

There is someone in this room who said something this year they desperately wish they could take back.

Someone who betrayed a trust.

Someone who lied.

Someone who failed a person they love.

Someone who has not made the phone call they know they need to make.

Someone carrying something they are deeply ashamed of.

And when we reach that line, Judaism does not ask them to stand up.

It does not ask them to identify themselves.

It does not ask them to tell us what happened.

Nobody turns around.

Nobody needs to know.

Instead, hundreds of voices say the words with them.

For a few seconds, their confession becomes ours.

[Pause.]

And that means there will also be words tomorrow that do not belong to you.

They belong to me.

And you are going to say them anyway.

When I say:

Ashamnu—

I may be confessing something you did.

When you say:

Bagadnu—

you may be confessing something I did.

I lend my voice to your confession.

And you lend your voice to mine.

And neither of us needs to know which words belong to whom.

Maybe the plural confession is not only about communal responsibility.

And maybe it's not to Help us avoid our own rationalisations.

Maybe it is also an act of communal tenderness.

Judaism does not make any one of us stand before God alone with the worst thing we have done.

It gives us one another.

Shame usually tells us to do the opposite.

Hide.

Don't let them know.

If they knew what you had done, they would look at you differently.

Maybe you don't belong with them anymore.

And Yom Kippur says:

Come inside.

Stand with us.

Take the same *machzor*.

Say the same words.

You don't have to tell us which one is yours.

Just don't leave.

[Pause.]

Think about how unusual that is.

There are things in Judaism we cannot do alone

We need a minyan.

We cannot read Torah publicly alone.

We do not say Kaddish alone.

There are sacred moments when Judaism insists:

You need other people.

Perhaps confession is one of them.

Perhaps there are some burdens human beings should not have to carry entirely by themselves.

Even guilt.

Even regret.

Even shame.

So Judaism surrounds us with a community.

And says:

You say theirs.

They will say yours.

Together, say:

Ashamnu.

We have sinned.

[Pause.]

And perhaps that is why the physical act of confession is so extraordinary.

Tomorrow, as we say these words, many of us will do what Jews have done for generations.

We will take our hand and strike our chest.

Our own chest.

Not the chest of the person sitting beside us.

Not the person whose behavior we spent the year criticizing.

Not the person we are still angry with.

Not the person whose sins seem so much easier to recognize than our own.

My hand comes back here.

To me.

My hand says:

I.

I did this.

I am responsible for the life I have lived.

I am responsible for the words I have spoken.

I am responsible for the hurt I have caused.

I am responsible for what I could have done and did not do.

There is no hiding from that.

But listen to what my mouth is saying at exactly the same moment.

Ashamnu.

We.

My hand says:

I am responsible.

My prayer says:

We. I am not alone.

[Long pause.]

Maybe that is Yom Kippur in one gesture.

Judaism asks something difficult of us.

Take responsibility without separating yourself from everyone else.

Look honestly at your own failures without imagining that failure puts you outside the community.

Do not use someone else's sin to prove your righteousness.

And do not imagine that your own sin makes you unworthy to stand among us.

We stand here together.

Not because we have all done the same things.

We haven't.

Not because every wrong is equivalent.

It isn't.

We stand together because every person in this room knows something about getting it wrong.

Every person knows something about regret.

Every person knows what it is to wish they could have another chance at something.

And every person here needs, at some point, to be carried by the voices around them.

Tomorrow, when we begin the confession, perhaps we can listen differently to that first syllable.

We.

It means:

Your life concerns me.

It means:

Before I decide that a sin belongs entirely to somebody else, I will look at myself.

And it means:

When you reach the words that are hardest for you to say—
you will not have to say them alone.

I will say them with you.

And when we reach mine—
you will say them with me.

My hand will say:

I.

My prayer will say:

We.

Ashamnu.

We have sinned.

And thank God—

we don't have to say it alone.