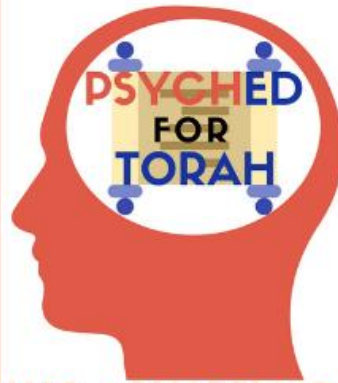


THE POWER OF CONFESSION



PSYCHED FOR TORAH - DARSHAS ACHAREI-MOS
RABBI DR. MORDECHAI SCHIFFMAN

The conversation surrounding Jewish self-improvement and related narratives revolving around Yom Kippur tend to focus on teshuva, or repentance. Whether increasing positive spiritual habits or decreasing negative ones, the focus of teshuva tends to be action-oriented. If a person steeped in sin successfully ceases his wayward behavior, we tend to think of him as completing the teshuva process. However, there is an additional component, whose absence calls into question the efficacy of the repentance, and that is vidui, or confession. Sourced in the Yom Kippur rituals of the Kohen Gadol found in this week's reading of Acharei-Mos, confession, according to the Rambam, is an absolutely necessary part of repentance. The question becomes, why is this so? If my behavior has improved, why is the verbalization of my past indiscretion compulsory?

In their review of spiritual confessions, psychologist Aaron Murray-Swank and his colleagues from Bowling Green State University, identify four mental health benefits attainable through confessing.¹ Two of which, increased social connection and impression management (that other people judge people who confess more positively), are irrelevant to Jewish ritual confession as they presume confession to another person. Within Judaism, confession is between man and God - there is no middleman. The third is that confession provides an emotional catharsis. Suppressing emotions can be unhealthy and verbally expressing them can help reduce feelings of guilt and shame. The last benefit relates to why confession is essential to the teshuva process, namely, that confession allows the person confessing to better understand what happened in the first place. "The act of translating thoughts and feelings into language," they write, "provides coherence and structure to human experience."

¹ Murray-Swank, A. B., McConnell, K. M., & Pargament, K. I. (2007). Understanding spiritual confession: A review and theoretical synthesis. *Mental Health, Religion & Culture*, 10(3), 275–291.

The Gemara in Yoma (36b), based on the verse in this week's parsha (Vayikra 16:6), states that the confession of the Kohen Gadol alone suffices to effect atonement (), even absent the bringing of a sacrifice. The root of the word for atonement, , argues Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch, means to "bury" or to "cover up." When we confess, God buries our past sins. Yet, Rabbi Hirsch contends, the sin is benevolently covered up only from God's perspective. From our perspective, the sin should not be buried, but remain vivid and clear in our minds. This is because the function of confession in Judaism is not a disclosure to another human being, but an admission to oneself (as is evident from the reflexive form of).

As long as our thoughts are bottled up in our minds, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik elaborates in *Al HaTeshuva*, they are definitionally unclear. We cannot fully grasp what we are thinking or feeling unless we verbally express the ideas. The act of constructing logical and grammatical sentences allows the fleeting and unintelligible chatter in the recesses of our brains to become coherent. Consequently, confession demands of us to have the courage to confront the shortcomings that we may have otherwise buried. This is why, Rabbi Soloveitchik argues, the confession of the Kohen Gadol acts as the atonement without an official sacrifice. The confession is the sacrifice. "A confession which is not just simple lip-service, but which emanates from an anguished soul and an aching heart is accounted as an offering on the alter... Just as we burn an offering on the altar, we burn our resolute serenity, cultivated pride and artificial life with the act of confession."²

Without confession, self-improvement is incomplete. To obtain the requisite self-awareness required, we must concretize our thoughts through speech. By so doing, may we merit a better understanding and mastery of ourselves, and , a complete return to God.

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² Translation obtained from *New Studies in the Weekly Parsha, Vayikra II* by Nechama Leibowitz