Yom Kippur Drash - Oct. 12, 2024

By Jenna Andelman

(Sing dai dai dai of ashamnu)

From its first notes, the vidui never fails to move us, to focus our attention and our emotions. Arguably the central piece of our High Holiday liturgy, the vidui represents the essence of our most important internal work over the 10 days of repentance.

Every year, after two or three rounds of the vidui, I find myself reflecting on the structure of this prayer. Delineating my own litany of wrongdoings, I start to consider how different it is from that of those around me. Paradoxically, the more I think about everyone in the room saying the same words, the more I am reminded: we are all unique, in our struggles and, by extension, in our paths to repentance. By assigning to the collective what is patently individual, the vidui ends up emphasizing - at least for me - our diversity and our differences.

Preparing for this drash, and pondering this incongruence, I decided to look at some of the other major parts of our Yom Kipur service for insight, beginning with Unetane Tokef.

Some of the most evocative images in all of Judaism are laid out in this moving prayer. God is portrayed as the Accuser, Witness, and Judge regarding each soul as it passes by. Before God is the book of life containing each individual's future, penned in their own handwriting.

For centuries, the narrative of Unetane Tokef has remained the dominant framing of the High Holidays. From a young age, we are taught about the book of life and the power of t'shuva, t'fila, and tsedaka to reverse a negative judgement.

This point is illustrated by stories such as that of the young boy who can recite nothing but the alef-bet or the young shepherdess who knows no prayer but the sound of her flute. Nevertheless, because of the purity of their hearts and their t'shuva, their prayers alone open the gates of heaven, allowing those of the rest of the community to rise up and be accepted.

This is a deeply personal Yom Kipur, a day of introspection, resolutions, and tallying up our sins against God and against other people. The ultimate goal is a complete re-making of our inner landscape.

The pull of the Unetane Tokef framework is so powerful that it masks an important fact: its focus on the individual can be seen as an anomaly. In fact, the orientation of most of our Yom Kipur prayers is collective. In of itself, this is not too surprising. Other than the occasional "Personal Meditation," the majority of our prayers throughout the entire year are in the collective voice, both grammatically and literally, as we pray together in a minyan.

What is perhaps more surprising is that these prayers we utter on the yamim nora'im are not focused either on individual fates or on individual actions, a trait that stems from the very origins of this holiday. If we descend from the highest reaches of God's heavenly desk and travel back in time, we find Moshe being taught the 13 attributes of God, a formula for turning divine anger away from the community when they have sinned. And we encounter the complex rites we will soon read about in the Avodah service, in which rituals are performed on behalf of everyone, and everyone reaps the benefit of a collective pardon.

T'fila, t'shuva, and tsedaka are not necessary in this framework. The importance of any one person's repentance is dwarfed by the magnitude of our sins. We are reliant on God's will to pardon, based on our communal relationship with the Divine. "Slach na l'avon ha'am haze k'godel chasdecha," we pray. Pardon us not because of anything we do but because You are inherently gracious.

Like the Unetane Tokef model, this Avodah model offers us powerful symbols, images that evoke completely different feelings and ideas. There is, of course, the scapegoat, who carries everyone's sin off to the wilderness - perhaps metaphorically, perhaps not. And there is the image of a single white cord, hanging before the people throughout Yom Kipur and holding the secret of their future. In contrast with a book full of individual fates, the strands of this string represent an entire nation, and it changes from red to white completely or not at all. Everyone's lives hang by the same thread - literally and figuratively.

As he left the Holy of Holies, the kohein gadol offered up a prayer for the people. His long list of requests included abundant harvests, peace, a lack of natural disasters, and even low prices. This prayer, the 13 attributes, avinu malkeinu, and the many other collective prayers we utter throughout Yom Kipur highlight our interconnectedness. The Avodah framework focuses on our common experiences, emphasizing that we are a people who share a relationship with God as a group, just as we share communities and, often, fates. (This truth is sadly evident as we follow the Avodah service with Eleh Ezkera.)

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Thus we hold two paradigms as we go through the ten days of repentance - the Unetane Tokef model focused on individuals, their sins, and individual t'shuva and the Avodah model focused on the joint

destiny of the Jewish community. These two models are intertwined throughout the Yom Kipur service, coming together so strikingly in the iconic vidui. As we have noted, the combination is uncomfortable. It feels counterintuitive to be speaking in the first person plural at the moment when we are each turned deeply inward, one eye on our faults and the other on the future being inscribed just for us in that heavenly book.

The most common Unetane Tokef explanation is that the collective voice leads us to contemplate whether we may have contributed to someone else's transgression. This approach is, of course, a very important element of our Yom Kipur practice, steering us toward the t'fila / t'shuva / tsedaka trifecta necessary for a good write-up in God's book.

But is there another explanation, perhaps informed by the Avodah approach? What can this lens add to our understanding of this prayer's collective language?

To answer that, I'd like to turn to the topic of purpose. Confronted with a smorgasbord of wrongdoings, written in the plural, only some of which pertain to each of us, the question naturally arises, "What exactly is it that God expects of us?" The vidui tells us what not to do, but when we have atoned and made amends, when the book of life is closed or the goat has been thrown off the cliff, what next? Is the purpose of our life simply to avoid sins and gather mitzvah points, or is there something more?

And, as we ponder the tension between the collective and our individuality, is the same expected of each of us?

At first blush, within the machzor and in the greater tradition, the answer to this last question seems to be, yes. So many sources describe an ideal way to conduct our lives, most of them falling under the general category of torah, avodah, and g'milut chasadim. Like the catalog of sins in the vidui, the same model is held up for everyone.

To cite one particularly striking example, Maimonides in the Mishneh Torah prescribes:

> A… craftsman may spend three hours each day involved in his work, and [devote] nine hours to Torah study:... three reading the Written Law; three [reading] the Oral Law; and three, meditating… to derive one concept from another.

Aside from the fact that we may not all be equally skilled at these activities, a major flaw in this approach is the lack of recognition of the many other ways of being and doing in the world. I am certainly not going to stand here on Yom Kipur and argue against the importance of focusing on the 613 mitzvot as one's life's purpose, but the reality is that, for most of us, they tend to be the backdrop to how we actually spend our time and energies. Even those of us who might make great Torah scholars may prefer a different trajectory. Many of us have critical skills and interests without which our communities would not prosper. Doctors. Teachers. Farmers. Entertainers. The list goes on and on.

On Yom Kipur, should the majority of us who spend the preponderance of our time on neither torah nor g'milut chasadim repent for this as a failing? Should our intentions today be focused on turning our life's direction toward those activities?

As almost always turns out to be true, there is a current within the tradition that acknowledges and even values our diversity. A view that not only recognizes but celebrates that there are many paths to being a praiseworthy Jew, and that even requires us to chart our own course.

We need look no further than Breishit for our first example. In a few weeks' time, we will read that humans are created in God's image. Mishnah Sanhedrin (4:5) proclaims:

> And this serves to tell of the greatness of the Holy Blessed One, for when a person stamps several coins with one seal, they are all similar to each other. But the Supreme Ruler of Rulers… stamped all people with the seal of Adam the first human…, and yet not one of them is similar to another.

In other words, our diversity is a feature, not a bug. And the fact that we are all different is a direct result of our being stamped in God's image, of containing an element of the divine.

Moreover, we are created for something specific and unique. In the first chapter of Sefer Yirmiyahu, God says to Jeremiah:

> Before I created you in the womb, I selected you;
> Before you were born, I consecrated you;

Jeremiah was designated for a purpose even before his conception. This beautiful concept can be applied to each of us. We are created for something that no one but us can achieve.

For example, in Sh'mot we read about Betzalel, the master craftsman of the mishkan. According to Bamidbar Rabbah, Moshe was not able to fully understand God's instructions for how to build the mishkan's menora, but Betzalel easily grasped them. The text also refers to the contributions of "the women who excelled in [spinning] goat hair." The sources explain that this task required great mastery; the women possessed a very specialized talent.

We find in Proverbs (3:9) the counsel to "honor God with all that has been bequeathed to you," and Rashi's interpretation is that we should "honor God with whatever you have been favored with, even with a pleasant voice."

The clear message of these sources is that we are each gifted with unique skills and talents, and that using those talents is a way to serve God.

The kabbalists and chasidic masters took this concept one step further. They focused on Enoch, a Torah figure who does not die but goes directly to Gan Eden. Imagining him as a shoemaker, they explain why: "With every stitch he made using the stitching awl he blessed God with a whole heart and perfect

intent… Never did he forget during even so much as a single incision to bless." In this tradition, which continues to this day, any profession, any act, can be used to serve God.[1]

Many of us are familiar with the tale of 18th century chasidic master Reb Meshulam Zusha of Anapoli, who lay crying inconsolably on his deathbed. When asked why, he answered:

> "When I pass from this world and appear before the Heavenly Tribunal, they won't ask me, 'Zusha, why weren't you as wise as Moshe or as kind as Avraham.' Rather, they will ask me, 'Zusha, why weren't you Zusha?' Why didn't I fulfill my potential? Why didn't I follow the path that could have been mine?"

We have now turned 180 degrees, from Maimonides' strict prescription to the concept that we are each gifted with a specific purpose, a unique role in God's plan and God's service. In his commentary on the liturgy, Olat Re'iyah, Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, the first chief rabbi of Palestine, summarizes this idea:

> The more clearly one studies the character of human souls, the more baffled one becomes over the great differences in personalities... It is, however, precisely through their differentiations that they are all united toward one objective, to contribute toward the perfection of the world, each person according to their special talent.

With this new lens of personal mission, let us return to our examination of the Yom Kipur service and its fusion of the intensely personal and the collective. Fundamentally, we are each on a holy journey, and we are all on a journey together.

From the communal perspective, the best way to serve God and humanity is by identifying our designated path and supporting others in theirs. Rather than simply focusing on our own flaws or our own successes, t'shuva in this context requires broadening our outlook to include the entire community.

As we pray, we can contemplate: What is my mission, and what is our collective mission? What contribution does the community need that I alone can provide? Whose voice or gift is missing, and how can I amplify it?

When we next recite the vidui, let us consider these additions:

> For the sin of not following our unique, God-given path
> For the sin of obstructing others on their journeys
> For the sin of not striving to strengthen the community

With this approach, we can re-interpret some of the classic Yom Kipur stories. Perhaps the tale about the boy's alef-bet and the shepherdess' flute prayer is not about one person's perfect intention. What if

[1] Moshe Idel, *The Angelic World: Apotheosis and Theophany*

that prayer was what was missing to make the community's prayer complete - the final puzzle piece to a true collective repentance?

Similarly, perhaps the book of Jonah is not only the tale of spectacular t'shuva but also the story of a person who would not accept his unique God-given role, an illustration of how refusing our life's mission can distort our own vision and have ripple effects on others at every stage of our journey.

Here then, is our final lesson. While we each have our own entry in the book of life, we are all a part of each other's stories. Our final decree, our fate, is dependent on the actions of others, just as our actions affect others' fates. In other words, we are each one strand in the kohein gadol's thread. We each represent a distinctive, critical fiber of that thread, but we are incomplete without the others - and the community can only flourish when we are all strong and whole. When each one of us is able to follow our own path, we can collectively change the thread from red to white - or change the world.

> May we all be sealed in the book of individual purpose and loving interdependence.
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> May it be a year of turning - from a focus on ourselves and our sins to a focus on our paths and our communities.
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> May it be a year in which we use our unique skills in the service of God and of our imperfect world.

And next year may we look around this tent and see a stronger kahal, a complete, pure white tapestry, woven together through mutual support, and serving God together through our beautiful diversity.

G'mar chatima tova.