

Mysteries of the Machzor with Liturgist Alden Solovy
Confessions Past and Present
Vidui Source Sheet

On Sin and Confession

1. Maimonides, Hilchot T'shuva 1:1¹

All commandments of the Torah, whether they be mandatory or prohibitive, if a man [*sic*]² violates any one of them, either presumptuously or erroneously, when he will repent himself and turn away from his sinful way, he is obliged to confess before God... The sinner says: "I beseech Thee, O Great Name! I have sinned; I have been obstinate; I have committed profanity against Thee, particularly in doing thus and such. Now, behold! I have repented and am ashamed of my actions; forever will I not relapse into this thing again." This is the elementary form of confession; but whosoever elaborates in confessing and extends this subject is, indeed, praiseworthy.

2. Mishah Yoma 8:9³

One who says: I shall sin and repent, sin and repent, they do not afford him the opportunity to repent. [If one says]: I shall sin and Yom Kippur will atone for me, Yom Kippur does not atone. For transgressions between man and God Yom Kippur atones, but for transgressions between man and his fellow Yom Kippur does not atone, until he has pacified his fellow.

3. Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman, PhD⁴

All the great religions, it would seem, have at least some mechanism by which adherents are urged to take moral inventory of their faults. Judaism certainly does, and it calls those faults "sins," thereby indicating that they are more than just issues of defective calculation or wrongheaded planning. They run counter to the will of God; they are not the way human beings are supposed to live.

4. Rabbi Marc Saperstein, PhD⁵

Without an awareness and articulation of sin leading to genuine remorse and a sincere appeal for forgiveness, repentance is impossible... Rational consideration must inevitably conclude that divine pardon due to repentance cannot be justified by law; it can arrive only by divine grace and mercy.

5. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks⁶

Confession is the hardest act in moral life, since *Homo sapiens* has been endowed with an inexhaustible capacity for self-justification and self-deception. Only knowledge that God loves, forgives and never gives up on us makes it possible.

6. Rabbi Richard S. Sarason, PhD⁷

The way we confront our failings is, first of all, by acknowledging them. This is why a verbal confession (*vidui*) – out loud, as an entire community – is a major part of the work of Yom Kippur... The process of

¹ Translation from Sefaria, https://www.sefaria.org/Mishneh_Torah%2C_Repentance.1?lang=en

² Some referenced texts contain gendered language, acknowledged here as antiquated and offensive.

³ Sefaria translation slightly adapted: https://www.sefaria.org.il/Mishnah_Yoma.8.9?lang=bi

⁴ Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman, PhD, "The Liturgy of Confession," from *Prayers of Awe: We Have Sinned, Sin and Confession in Judaism*, ed. Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman, PhD (Jewish Lights, 2012).

⁵ *Ibid.*, Rabbi Marc Saperstein, PhD, "The Problem of Repentance."

⁶ Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *Koren Rosh Yom Kippur Machzor* (Koren, 2014), p. 164.

⁷ Rabbi Richard S. Sarason, PhD, "Why Do We Need This Day of Atonement?" from *Mishkan HaNefesh: Machzor for the Days of Awe, Yom Kippur* (CCAR Press, 2015), p. xxii.

t'shuva – repentance, return, realignment – follows upon the acknowledgement of our failings and recognition of what needs to change.

7. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks⁸

Confession is more than remorse, though it presupposes it. Remorse is a state of mind. Confession is a formal act. It is the difference between feeling guilty and pleading guilty in a court of law. The former is an emotion, the latter a declaration. In the case of *t'shuva*, it is a declaration to God. As well as involving remorse, confession presupposes a commitment not to repeat the sin.

8. Rabbi Margaret Moers Wenig, DD⁹

Confessions made to God, however, are not the same as confessions to another human being. To our fellow, the precise words we use matter. To God they don't. When confessing to another human being, we acknowledge precisely what we have done and accept responsibility for the damage we inflicted. Confessions to God, however, are symbolic. Their very form tells us so: *Ashamnu* is an acrostic. *Al Chet*, too. Are there only two sins that begin with a gimel? Sephardi confessions, too, are symbolic. One lists violations of all positive commandments, and another, all negative commandments.

The Language of Confession

9. General Observations

Vidui Zuta - All services in all denominations contain a short confession, *Ashamnu*.

Vidui Rabbah - All services (except *N'ilah*) in all denominations include a long confession, *Al Chet*.

Both confessions always appear with introductions and conclusions.

The *Ashamnu* and the refrain to the *Al Chet* are typically sung to upbeat melodies.

In the *Ashamnu*, 21 of the 25 offenses are formulated as a single verb.¹⁰

In the *Al Chet*, 11 of the 44 sins enumerated have to do with speech.¹¹

The lists contain none of the cardinal sins of Judaism: murder, adultery/incest, idolatry.¹²

10. S.Y. Agnon¹³

The sages of old, who knew the sorrow of the sinner who is truly turning to his God but has no words to tell his sins, composed many confessions. Some of them are arranged alphabetically, to make amends for the sinner's marring of the twenty-two letters in which the Torah is written; others are arranged to correspond to the tractates of the Talmud, to make amends for a sinner's defections from the Babylonian and Palestinian Talmuds; others are arranged to correspond to the limbs of the body, to make amends for the sins men commit with each and every limb of their bodies.

11. Dr. Marc Zvi Bretler¹⁴

The Bible has many words for sin, including, most commonly, *avon* (appearing 233 times), *pesha* (93 times), and *chet* (34 times). The words are often used interchangeably, however, making it difficult to

⁸ Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *Koren Rosh Yom Kippur Machzor* (Koren, 2014), p. 1355.

⁹ Op cit., L. Hoffman, Rabbi Margaret Moers Wenig, DD, "Sin, Confession, and ... Forgiveness?"

¹⁰ Ibid., Dr. Reuven Kimelman, "Confession and its Discontents."

¹¹ Op cit., *Koren*, p. 171.

¹² Op cit., L. Hoffman, Dr. Reuven Kimelman, "Confession and its Discontents."

¹³ S.Y. Agnon, *Days of Awe*, p. 218.

¹⁴ Op cit., L. Hoffman, Dr. Marc Zvi Bretler, "Sin, Sanction, and Confession in the Bible."

know whether each expresses a different nuance. Etymologically, each comes from its own metaphorical sphere: *avon* is related to words for “twisting, erring”; *pasha* to “rebel”; and *chet* to “miss the mark,” but once the words are formed, they take on their own meanings not necessarily related to their metaphoric origins.

12. Dr. Reuven Kimelman¹⁵

[In] Leviticus 16:21, the order of the sins in the high priest’s confession is *chet*, *avon*, and *pasha*, a model that the liturgy follows, thereby structuring our sins in ascending order of gravity: *chatanu*, *avinu*, *pashanu*, “We acted carelessly, we acted perversely, we acted spitefully.” The first is not willful, the second is not only willful but also seeks to advance our interests, and the third not only willfully seeks to advance our interests but also defiantly seeks to displace divine authority with our own.

13. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik¹⁶

The difference between individual and communal confession is tremendous... In certain Jewish communities it is customary for the whole congregation to sing the *Al Chet* confession in heartwarming melodies. The individual does not sing *Al Chet*; he weeps. No so the community, because it does not come to *plead* for atonement; it claims it as its right.

Vidui Zuta

14. Rabbi David A. Teutsch, PhD¹⁷

The two confessions differ both in form and in function. *Al Chet* is a long list of sins on which we can meditate individually as we consider our own culpability. The much shorter *Ashamnu* is a formulaic summary of sin that is usually sung in unison. Through recitation of *Ashamnu*, the community acknowledges the simple fact that transgression within the community has occurred and that everyone shares part of the responsibility for that. We first draw strength from acknowledging collective wrongdoing; only then do we turn to our individual confession.

15. Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman, PhD¹⁸

The original version in Seder Rav Amram reads: “We are so arrogant and insolent that we say before You, Adonai our God and our ancestors’ God, we are righteous and have not sinned. Truly, we have sinned.” Originally, then, the prayer admitted the negative side of human personality: not only do we sin, but we are even so arrogant and insolent as to maintain that we do not. Over the course of time, such a gross admission of human weakness came, apparently, to be seen as overly pessimistic.

16. Commentary, *Divrei Mishkan HaNefesh*¹⁹

We have restored the Hebrew to say that we *are* insolent (*anu azei fanim*) instead of the usual (*shein...*) We have restored this earlier version which serves as a simple declaration of the gap between who we are and where we need to grow.

¹⁵ Ibid., Dr. Reuven Kimelman, “Confession and its Discontents.”

¹⁶ Pinchas H. Peli, trans., *Soloveitchik on Repentance: The Thought and Oral Discourses of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik* (Paulist Press, 1984), p. 119.

¹⁷ Op cit., L. Hoffman, Rabbi David A. Teutsch, “Our Sins? They’re Not All Mine!”

¹⁸ Ibid., Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman, PhD, “The Liturgy of Confession.”

¹⁹ Op cit., *Divrei*, p. 41.

Vidui Rabbah

17. Commentary, *Mishkan HaNefesh*²⁰

The original *Al Chet* confession consisted of only six verses. The prayer's likely author, Yose ben Yose (3rd-4th cent.) chose to focus on the underlying nature of the sin by asserting that the wrongs we commit fall into six categories: those we do under duress and those we do by choice; those we do by mistake and those we do deliberately; those we do secretly and those we do openly.

18. Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman, PhD²¹

By and large, Sephardi Jews of the northern branch say hardly any lines of *Al Chet* at all—they make do with six lines that establish the basic categories of sin and ignore the practice of insisting on an acrostic. The southern branch uses a single acrostic: one line per letter. Ashkenazi Jews double that.

A Fist on the Chest

19. Rabbi Delphine Horvilleur²²

Ashamnu and *Al Chet* come outfitted with liturgical choreography. As they hear the first notes of *Ashamnu*, worshipers immediately stand, wrapped in their *tallitot*. They beat out the rhythm of each passing Hebrew word, with fists clenched against their chests... The choreography is simple but incredibly powerful... We admit our brokenness verbally and even effect it physically with our beating movement, hoping to rebuild a sense of wholeness by *N'ilah*, by the time "the gates are closed." Our choreographed confession is like a collective self-destruction on our way to reconstructive surgery.

20. Rabbi Lawrence Kushner²³

The gesture, naturally, has many variations. Some hold the *tzitzit* of their *tallitot* in a fist and beat their breasts. Others softly pat their chests with their open palms. And some, I notice, simply leave their hand over their heart. But, for all, the intent is identical: I've been bad; I must symbolically punish myself.

21. Rabbi Jeffrey K. Salkin, DMin²⁴

A ritualized beating of the heart is the "freeing up" of the hardened heart and the act of forcing it to "jump-start" its potential for moral introspection... But the heart is also the seat of the passions. By beating upon the heart, we are attacking the very organ that is the source of sin (*Kohelet Rabbah*). Or perhaps we are not beating on the heart. Rather, we are knocking upon the heart as we would knock upon the gates of heaven.

22. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik²⁵

He must sense and realize that the gates are locked, for the sins have already been committed. And now if he wishes to repent of his ways he must cry out and beat insistently at the gates so they allow him and

²⁰ Op cit., *Mishkan Hanefesh*, p. 300.

²¹ Op cit., L. Hoffman, Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman, PhD, "The Liturgy of Confession." The author notes: "Broadly speaking, there are two Sephardi traditions: those Jews who moved east across the Mediterranean and settled in the Ottoman Empire; and those who moved north into the Netherlands and, from there, into England and across the Atlantic to North and South America."

²² Ibid., L. Hoffman, Rabbi Delphine Horvilleur, "The Jewish 'ABC Song.'"

²³ Op cit., L. Hoffman, Rabbi Lawrence Kushner, "On Hitting Yourself."

²⁴ Ibid, Rabbi Jeffrey K. Salkin, DMin, "Can 'Sin' Be Redeemed?"

²⁵ Ibid., Peli, p. 78.

his confession to enter within... The entire liturgy, for Yom Kippur, from beginning to end, are geared to this one goal: Knocking on the gates, again and again, crying out: "Oh, I beseech Thee."

23. Rabbi Jeffrey K. Salkin, DMin²⁶

It is fair to say that the ritualized beating on the chest during the *Al Chet* confession symbolizes that someone has died. Who has died? The worshiper... When we pound on our chests, we are mourning our own inner deaths. And perhaps we might also say that the beating on the chest is not only an act of mourning for ourselves, but also a kind of spiritual CPR.

24. Rabbi Israel Meir Kagan (the Chofetz Chaim)

The Chofetz Chaim taught: "God does not forgive us when we strike our hearts; rather, we are forgiven when our heart strikes us—that is, when we feel the pangs of conscience for our wrongdoings."²⁷ Regarding the upbeat music, he says we're like workers who've come to clean a dirty, neglected mansion. Rather than complaining during the hard work, we're inspired by the prospect of a clean dwelling, steadily doing the work to clean the house, humming a melody to match our hopeful spirits.²⁸

Confession as a Journey

25. Commentary, *Mishkan HaNefesh*²⁹

Our Sages recognized that no liturgical text could include the wrongful acts of every individual. The formal confessions are meant to stir the memory and prompt our private confession.

26. Dr. Reuven Kimelman³⁰

The liturgy mandates that our confessions be recited silently in the Amidah, not just out loud in the repetition that follows. Yes, there is a time to specify and a time not to specify; a time to go public and a time to remain private. While private confessions may be conducted in the first person singular, public confessions require the first-person plural... In the public listing of sins, strangely enough, there is companionship for sinners and privacy for penitents.

27. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks³¹

Confession is only part of the process of repentance, which also involve (1) a genuine feeling of remorse, (2) putting right, wherever we can, what we have done wrong, and making restitution wherever appropriate, (3) resolving not to commit that sin again, and (4) acting on that resolve.

28. Commentary, *Mishkan HaLev*³²

Communal recitations are no substitute for the essential act of individual *t'shuvah*: admitting our own wrongdoing, apologizing to those we have harmed and seeking their forgiveness.

²⁶Op cit., L. Hoffman, Rabbi Jeffrey K. Salkin, DMin, "Can 'Sin' Be Redeemed?" The author notes: "The Sages (Genesis Rabbah 96; Talmud, Shabbat 148b, Megillah 3b, and elsewhere) refer to beating on a chest at a funeral as a sign of mourning."

²⁷ Op cit., *Mishkan Hanefesh*, p. 86. The story appears in multiple sources.

²⁸ Op cit., L. Hoffman. S.Y. Agnon attributes the story to the Baal Shem Tov.

²⁹ Op cit., *Mishkan Hanefesh*, p. 90.

³⁰ Ibid., Dr. Reuven Kimelman, "Confession and its Discontents."

³¹ Op cit., *Koren*, p. 1374. A summary from Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot T'shuva* 2:1-3.

³² Commentary, *Mishkan HaLev: Prayers for S'lichot and the Month of Elul* (CCAR Press, 2017), p. 128.

29. Rabbi Janet R. Marder³³

In *Mishkan HaNefesh*, the traditional understandings of sin are expanded, reconsidered, and challenged – all with the goal of inspiring worshipers to engage in serious and unflinching examination of their own behavior... The full work of *t'shuva* cannot be accomplished within the Day of Atonement itself; it requires many hours and entails personal encounters with those we have wronged.

30. Rabbi Noa Kushner³⁴

Confession should (1) bring about behavioral change, (2) support change that is already under way, or (3) inculcate a new mind-set that is likely to produce change in the future. But in all three scenarios, of course, we require conscious knowledge of the negative behavior that is at stake.

Source sheet prepared by Alden Solovy

Alden Solovy spreads joy and excitement for prayer. An American Israeli liturgist, poet, and educator, Alden is the Liturgist-in-Residence for the Pardes Institute of Jewish Studies in Jerusalem. His writing was transformed by multiple tragedies, marked in 2009 by the sudden death of his wife from catastrophic brain injury. His teaching spans from Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion and the Conservative Yeshiva in Jerusalem to synagogues throughout North America, as well as Leo Baeck College in London and Limmud Conferences in the U.S., Canada, and the UK. He is the author of five books, three from CCAR Press: [This Joyous Soul: A New Voice for Ancient Yearnings](#), [This Grateful Heart: Psalms and Prayers for a New Day](#), and [This Precious Life: Encountering the Divine with Poetry and Prayer](#). Alden's work is anthologized in 15 volumes from Jewish and non-Jewish publishers. He writes for Ritualwell, RavBlog and the *Times of Israel*, and is a three-time winner of the Peter Lisagor Award for Exemplary Journalism. Find his latest work at ToBendLight.com. In 2012, Alden made aliyah to Jerusalem. He can be reached at asolovy54@gmail.com.

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³³ Rabbi Janet R. Marder, "Praying in Captivity" from *Divrei Mishkan Hanefesh: A Guide to the CCAR Machzor* (CCAR Press, 2016), pp. 70-71.

³⁴ Op cit., L Hoffman, Rabbi Noa Kushner, "What We Do Not Know."