



Everything I need to know about Yom Kippur, I learned from the Viddui

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If you were to ask me what the highlight of the Yom Kippur service was, I would probably say Kol Nidrei out of habit. After all, it is supposed to be one of the most powerful moments in the Jewish calendar. I find the music moving, but the words leave me high and dry. After a moment of reflection, I would say that the Viddui, or the Confession, is the highlight of Yom Kippur. Perhaps it is the fact that the Viddui is recited no fewer than ten times over the course of the day, twice at each service, one private and one public. Maybe it is the shockingly blunt text that names all of our sins in one unapologetic list. Maybe it is the stark contrast between the serious nature of text of the Viddui and the upbeat melody it is often sung to. When preparing to teach the Viddui in the elementary classes this week, I have come to understand that the Viddui captures the essence of Yom Kippur.

The Viddui or Confession

The Viddui is also known as *Ashamnu*, which is the first word of the Viddui. Essentially, the Viddui is a list of sins in alphabetical order, from Aleph to Tav. We recite the Viddui privately after each Amidah throughout the day, and then the Hazzan leads the congregation in the Viddui all over again. For each sin on the list, the tradition is to beat one's chest lightly as we recite or sing aloud the sin. Everyone recites all of the sins on the entire list, no matter if they have committed that particular act or not. Moreover, like (almost) all Jewish liturgy, the Viddui is phrased as 'We' and not 'I'.

'We', not 'I'

The most striking feature of the Viddui is the plural nature of the confession. We have sinned. We have been false. We have been wicked. There may be an 'I' in Viddui, but there is no *Ani* (I in Hebrew) in Viddui. When we recite this list of sins together, we do not stand as individuals; we stand as a community who are responsible for one another. If someone among us has done something wrong, one could (and should) ask the community, "Did you know this was going on? If so, how could you let this happen? If not, how can you make sure that this won't happen again?" All of our actions are connected to each other. Perhaps in some way, our actions or inactions led to the circumstances where this sin was committed. When we rise for the Viddui, we are taking responsibility not only for ourselves, but also for our community.

But I didn't do it!

One of my students this week asked, "So, maybe this past year I did cheat on a quiz, but I never abused anyone. Why should I say that one?" Two students in that class offered excellent insight into this question. The first student said, "Maybe if you say it today, you won't do it in the future." The next student said, "Maybe when you say it, you think back

and you realize that you did do it, but did not know that you did it.” (By the way, this is why I love teaching: I learn so much from our students!) These three students today helped us all understand that Yom Kippur is the day on which time stops for one day, and we can look back at the past year and forward and the year to come and really think about who we have been and who we want to be.

Ten Times? Really?!

Yeah, ten times. Five privately and five publicly. That is a lot of confessing! Maybe one of the times, you were out of the room. Maybe your kids needed something that distracted you. Maybe you simply went through the motions the first four times. Repeating a litany of sins over and over again can serve as a mantra to focus on our lives and to connect to those around us. The private Viddui recitations can be times to focus inward on ourselves and what state we are in, while the public ones can lead us to think about how our actions affect those around us. Bear in mind that until 500 years ago, there were very few printed prayer books. For some people, the public recitation was the only one in which they could fully participate. Reciting them in a crowd also makes the confession easier to do. No one is being singled out for any one particular act. We all stand together and confess to them all so that every person can fully confess.

From Soup to Nuts (Boy am I hungry!)

Many pieces of the Siddur are in an acrostic format, where the first letter of each line is based on the alphabet. The Viddui is one of those pieces. Beginning with *Ashamnu* (We are guilty) and ending with *Titanu* (We got lost), the Viddui offers up one sin per letter of the Aleph-Bet. One possible meaning of this form is to say that we have “said it all,” from A to Z! The range of sins is wide, and one could look at these as categories for all other sins. One likely reason for the acrostic is to make memorization easier for those who did not have a prayer book in their hands. There were probably other versions of the Viddui list before the printers made the final decision. One intriguing feature of the Viddui’s acrostic merits a comment as well: there are three lines for the letter Tav! One fifth-grader yesterday suggested that this means, “Well, we listed a lot of sins, and we could go on and on, but it would take forever to actually list all of our mistakes. God knows the rest.”

I am not into self-flagellation

It may be a remnant of the more vigorous acts of penitence of the 13th century German pietists who would do some extreme acts to help them do teshuvah, but beating the chest lightly is an essential part of the Viddui. Beating on the chest could be us knocking on the heart, inviting it to open. It could be someone trying to soften their heart so that the words of the Viddui can sink in. It could be a way to bring the mind to attention for each act that we may or may not have done. It is yet another way to pray with our whole body.

What is up with up-tempo melody?

I have prayed in my share of synagogues, but the first time I heard the up-tempo melody for the Viddui, I could not fathom what was going on in the Hazzan’s mind. How could a list of personal and communal sin merit a joyful tune? I have come to realize that I misunderstood the nature of Yom Kippur. Rosh Hashanah is the day of trembling and fear. Yom Kippur is the day on which we are confident of God’s forgiveness. The melody for the Viddui reflects the assurance we have of God’s patience and endless love for each and every one of us, a feeling that would be good to carry with us throughout the year.

Conclusion

Kol Nidrei may be the head of Yom Kippur, but the Viddui is the heart. It gets us on our feet to confront who we are and how we act throughout the day. Even if you recite it alone, a Jew is never really alone. On Yom Kippur, the Jewish community stands up together all over the world, beating their chests and singing aloud: We made mistakes. Here they are. We can do better this year.

G'mar Hatimah Tovah!
Rabbi Pepperstone

As a family:

1. Have a festive meal before Yom Kippur (called a Seudah Mafseket), and for the break fast. These are important parts of Yom Kippur when families should gather.
2. Talk about how you are feeling while fasting during the day. This can give children the confidence that you are ok and are not in any danger.
3. Have your children eat with others who are not able or allowed to fast, such as the elderly or the ill or other children. They should still recite the appropriate blessings, say Kiddush on Friday night and Saturday afternoon and do Birkat Hamazon with the insertions for Yom Kippur.
4. Encourage your children to also “fast from” other things – toys, games, favorite activities, leather shoes, bathing, etc. This can help children feel part of the “fasting” even if they are eating and drinking.

TO LEARN MORE ABOUT THE TORAH READING FOR [YOM KIPPUR](#), ANSWER THESE QUESTIONS:

1. What animal was Aaron commanded to sacrifice as a sin offering, and what were the Israelites commanded to offer?
2. For the burnt offering, Aaron and the Israelites offered the same animal. What was it?
3. Why were lots cast upon the two goats used as the sin offering for the Israelites?
4. What was done with the live goat?
5. What similarities can you find between this first Yom Kippur and the way we celebrate Yom Kippur today?