

Viduy, Revisited

Maybe it's just me, but I feel that as we grow older and perhaps more cynical, one of the central elements of Yom Kippur, the Viduy - confession for one's sins - is losing its power to affect us, at least in a lasting manner. Not only that, it seems that even the temporary and cursory impact is more a result of the general atmosphere of the day than of contemplating and reflecting on the text of the Viduy. I can think of several reasons for our failure to be affected by the Viduy:

1. It is hard to accept responsibility, admit mistakes, and take actions to correct them, so as we read the Viduy we apply the self-accusatory tone to others. I clearly witnessed that tendency one year, when following the traditional custom of asking people to forgive each other before Kol Nidre, I asked my congregants if anyone feels that he or she offended someone and never apologized. The answer was total silence (cue in the crickets). When I proceeded to ask if anyone feels that others who have wronged him or her did not apologize yet, many hands went up. Needless to say, that miraculous event caused me to praise God, who in His mysterious ways brought all the righteous, offended people to me, while sending all the wicked offenders to other synagogues but then I realized that I would probably get the same results in every synagogue.

2. Because it is so hard to acknowledge mistakes, apologize, and make amendments, we become immune to the annual ritual of chest-banging. We start at a young age, full of hope and devotion, and we make promises and vows we cannot keep, but when the devout teenager who was shedding tears for gossiping or talking during prayers, realizes at a certain point that he did it again and again and again, he gives up and treats the Viduy as one more Tefila which needs to be recited. The fact that the Viduy has been copied and pasted into almost every prayer, although it was originally meant to be said only once a year, apart from the personal contemplation that would take place in one's private rooms, doesn't help much. A normal synagogue goer, who also says Viduy with the nightly Shema, might end up saying Viduy close to 900 times a year, turning it into a soulless, meaningless habit.

3. Many poets and authors composed their own Viduy, and their various versions eventually found their way into our rituals, so on Yom Kippur the Viduy appears in many different formats in what seems to be the longest service in the Jewish prayer book. One Viduy is said alphabetically מְאֵלֶּף עַד תּוֹי, and another backwards תּוֹי עַד מְאֵלֶּף; One is written in prose and another

as a poem; one is organized by the severity of the punishment and in yet another, in which the author belittles himself and describes transgressions at the leadership level, is follows the chronology of the author's life; one is dedicated to negative concepts – *מִצְוֹת לֹא תַעֲשֶׂה*, and another to the positive commandments – *מִצְוֹת עֲשֶׂה*. Prohibitions, transgressions and shortcomings of varying degrees are all gathered under one roof in the Yom Kippur Mahazor and the total tally of all transgressions is so overwhelming that it often defeats the goal. Instead of awakening and deciding to change their ways, people tend to feel that these extensive lists of vices and vile actions do not apply to them. Who can truly lament *גַּם בְּכַנְפֵינוּ נִמְצְאוּ דָם נִפְשׁוֹת עֲנִיִים* – our robes are full with the blood of the poor and the meek; or *אֵת אֲשֶׁר אָסַרְתָּ הַתּוֹרָה וְנָאֵת* – I have ruled against the Torah, making the forbidden permissible and the permissible forbidden; or who can say that he committed one of the 24 transgressions for which the Beth Din excommunicates a person?

4. Finally, even Hebrew speakers find it difficult to fully understand the somewhat archaic language of some of the prayers, let alone those for whom Hebrew is a second or acquired language and those who have no command of the language.

The best remedy for all these ailments is to understand that the Viduy and all of its reincarnations which are printed in the various prayer books, is only a suggestion, a checklist and a reminder for us to identify our weak points. If the printed Viduy does that to you, or the one sung by the cantor, that's great, but if not, you are entitled and maybe even obligated to draw around you an imaginary force field in which you alone will contemplate actions, words and thoughts. Create for yourself a sanctuary within the sanctuary, a private Holy of Holies, where you alone can enter, aided by the ambience and the beautiful melodies, and like the High Priest at the time of the Temple, review the passing year and plan your spiritual path for the new one.

If I may, I would like to present here a Viduy of my own. Some of the things mentioned here apply to me and some to people I have met and counseled throughout the years. I also included a positive Viduy, listing things we should be thankful for, because the Hebrew words for confession and thanks – *וְיָדוּי וְתוֹדָה* – come from the same root, and once we are able to appreciate the good which God and fellow humans bestow upon us, we are bound to improve our ways, so here goes:

For arrogance, pride and impatience

For asking of others what I would not ask of myself

I repent

For losing temper and losing control

For double parking, honking, reckless driving

For postponing, procrastinating, and giving excuses,

I regret

For rejecting those who look, act, or think differently

For not understanding the emotional needs of others

For failing to express love and compassion

I repent

For letting fear take over and paralyze me,

For dwelling on the negative

For refusing to see blessings and abundance,

I regret

For rebelling against parents, teachers, and elders

For not understanding my children when they do the same,

For missing great opportunities

For wasting time thinking of these lost opportunities,

I repent

For not learning more

For not having more fun,

For not being consistent

For not practicing what I preach,

For not showering my loved ones with unconditional love

For not enriching my life the way I could have,

I regret

I know very well that try as I may I am bound to stumble again

But I want to promise myself and You that next year it will happen less frequently

May I have the strength to remember this moment of repentance and sincerity and carry it with me throughout the year to light my way and guide my life

I want to thank You, God

For giving me life, family, and friends

For allowing me to talk to and search for You

For giving human beings talents and abilities

And for giving me mine,

Thank You for this beautiful world with its sights, smells, commotion, animals, birds, and natural phenomena,

Thank You for entrusting us with such a magnificent creation

May we be blessed with the wisdom and foresight to take proper care of it as you have commanded our first forefather, Adam.

May we be able to keep the covenant you have made with Abraham and follow his teachings of balancing justice and loving kindness.

I would also like to thank the men and women, all around the world, who work ceaselessly to make this world a better place. They should all be mentioned in our prayers and respected in our daily actions and thoughts, and inspire us to do the same and strive to contribute our time, energy and resources to the improvement and perfection of mankind.

I thank scientists, scholars, and inventors, who use their time and wisdom to make life on this planet more pleasant and safe,

I appreciate all teachers who see their work as a holy mission and who care deeply for each and every one of their students,

I respect doctors, paramedics, and volunteers, who fight diseases all over the world,

I cherish the endeavors of the brave men and women of the IDF and the US army, police, firefighters, and social workers,

I pray to HaShem, but I know that ultimately it is my responsibility to keep my word, live up to my potential, progress from selfish to altruistic, and never remain static; to use every moment of precious life given to me in a way neither I nor others will regret, and to know that my time here (at this moment, at shul on Yom Kippur, as well as in this world) has not been wasted. AMEN