

Kol Nidrei 2020/5781  
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Yom Kippur, we know, is all about reflecting honestly on the ways we have sinned in the past year--how we have fallen short of who we want to be--and repairing those wrongs so we can move forward. You might say the holiday revolves around two Hebrew words: "*chatanu*," we have sinned, which we say over and over in various permutations, and "*salachti*," I forgive, which God says right after Kol Nidrei and, we hope, repeatedly over the course of the 25 hours.

But what exactly does *chatanu* mean? That language of sin is not natural in our vernacular, as modern Jews. We pretty much trot it out once a year, on Yom Kippur, and aside from that we keep it in the back of our closets like some ugly wedding present--not something we can get rid of but also not something we're excited to use.

Tonight, I want to try and unpack *chatanu*, "We have sinned," translate it into a spiritual and emotional language that will resonate more to us. And we'll do it using a case study from the book of Genesis as our lens.

Here's the scene: Joseph has risen to be Pharaoh's right-hand man in Egypt. A terrible famine grips the land, and Joseph's brothers go down to buy grain from him, not knowing the wealthy Egyptian lord before them is in fact the brother they sold into slavery years before. After some negotiation, he sells them the grain but keeps the second-oldest brother, Shimon, in prison in Egypt. Joseph tells them that if they ever want to buy grain from him again, they must bring their youngest brother Benjamin with them.

Jacob, of course, is furious: he lost Joseph years before, he has lost Shimon, and now--when the grain runs out--they mean to take his beloved youngest, his Benjamin, from him as well?

Reuben, the eldest, steps up and tries to take responsibility for the situation. "Send Benjamin with me, dad," he says, "and if I don't bring him back to you, you can kill my two sons." (Gen. 42:37)

Needless to say, Jacob refuses Reuben's assurances. So then Judah steps up with a different approach:

"I myself will be surety for him," Judah says. "You shall receive him back from my very hand: if I do not bring him back to you and set him before you, *vechatati lecha kol hayamim*, I shall stand guilty before you forever." (Gen. 43:9)

And Jacob agrees to send Benjamin in Judah's care.

There's that word, *chatati*--just in the singular, not the plural we're more familiar with--that brought our attention here. I shall stand guilty before you, or I will have sinned before you, forever. I submit to you that by delving into this Jacob-Reuben-Judah triangle and understanding the difference between Reuben's ham-handed, failed approach and Judah's more sincere, successful one we can come to a better understanding of what it means to say, "I have sinned."

And I've chosen this case study for two reasons. First, it's not our usual High Holidays fare. And second, it's a case of *chatati* between people, which is less common in the Torah than *chatati* between people and God, so I think there's more we can learn from it.

The first thing we notice is that Reuben passes the risk off on someone else. He puts his innocent children on the line for his own potential failing. Judah takes the risk fully upon himself.

We've seen this before with Reuben: He tries to do the right thing, to be the adult in the room, but he never quite gets it right. Maybe his moral reasoning just isn't sophisticated or deep enough, or maybe he lacks the courage to follow through on his convictions. Remember, when the brothers wanted to kill Joseph outright, Reuben was the one who proposed throwing him in the pit. His plan was to sneak back later and rescue Joseph, but in the meanwhile the other brothers--at Judah's instigation, I might point out--sold him to some traders as a slave. When Reuben comes back and finds the pit empty, he says, "Now where will I go?" and then he seems to shrug and go along with the other brothers to tell Jacob that Joseph was killed by a wild beast. Reuben doesn't stand up for Joseph up front, and then he folds.

Similar deal here. Reuben means well, giving his father some surety, some sense of how weighty the mission is--Reuben's taking this seriously, dad, he's not going to mess it up!--but the only tool he can think of is violence. An eye for an eye. Fair, right?

So the first thing that Judah's *chatati* might mean is "I'm taking responsibility for this."

The more we think about Reuben's offer, to kill his two sons--let's remember, they're Jacob's grandsons--the more ludicrous it becomes. The consequence is so severe that it feels like Reuben really isn't taking the situation seriously. Like Reuben can't fathom that he will fail, and so it doesn't matter what he promises. He's boasting to his father, not attending to the old man's deep-seated and quite reasonable concern.

Contrast that with Judah, who knows something about suffering. For his role in selling Joseph, I imagine that for years he has been carrying a disproportionate share of the guilt for their crime. Moreover, he has already lost his first and second sons, in the Tamar episode, and almost ordered his daughter-in-law burned to death. Unlike Reuben, he doesn't have to imagine what it would be like to lose children or to kill; he knows. And from that well of pain within himself comes the awareness that the way out of the dilemma is not more violence; it's empathy, which becomes a foundation for trust.

So that gives us a second meaning for *chatati*: I see your pain.

Now, if you're not familiar with the story of Tamar, it's worth my going into it for a minute, because it leads us to a third meaning of *chatati*. And the Torah places it in the chapter right after the brothers, led by Judah, sell Joseph into slavery. Tamar was married to Judah's firstborn son, who died. And then to his second son, who also died. Judah, worrying that she is somehow cursed, puts off indefinitely marrying her to his third son, leaving her in a permanent state of limbo. So when Judah's wife dies, Tamar disguises herself as a harlot and seduces him, keeping her identity secret. When she is discovered to be pregnant, Judah orders her burned at the stake as an adultress, presumably in keeping with the law of the time. But in the climactic moment, Tamar reveals to Judah that he is the father; he relents and, presumably, she gets her limbo situation resolved. "*Tzadkah mimeni*," Judah says; "She is more righteous than me."

The words are not *chatati*, but I would argue the intention is the same. Judah is a patriarch, wealthy and powerful. Tamar is a widow twice over, giving the appearance of being some sort of mankiller, and now she is an adultress. Her status is so far below his that he could easily have had her burned and the whole embarrassing problem would have gone away. But Judah is willing to put righteousness ahead of status and take his comeuppance.

And the same qualities are operating in the Benjamin situation, Reuben is hyperconscious of status and trying to project the machismo of being the eldest son, the next in line. Judah, despite being a rising star in the family constellation, doesn't have to prove how tough he is.

So a third meaning of *chatati* might be: I admit I was wrong, even if I would prefer not to.

And finally, above and beyond how barbaric it is for Reuben to offer the lives of his two sons, it also indicates to me that Reuben is convinced there would be a solution to the problem. If he failed to bring Benjamin back, there would be some price, some punishment, that could settle up the accounts, and all he has to do is find it. He's transactional. In contrast, Judah gets that, if he fails, there will be no absolution. Nothing would be able to fill that void. The truth that Judah understands and Reuben does not is that losing Benjamin would be devastating to himself as well. Judah would be heartbroken at letting his father down, at causing the loss of yet another brother, at not being the adult, the mensch, he is determined to be. Facing that possibility with eyes wide open, he still embraces it. He and Jacob would share that pain, should this scenario come to pass, forever.

We sometimes think and talk, around this time of year, about sin as something that can be washed away, balanced out. The power of Judah's *chatati* lies in the exact opposite state, the fact that he could never escape it if it came to pass.

And that suggests a fourth meaning of *chatati*: I don't know how to fix this--perhaps this cannot be fixed--but I am here with you.

Here's one last bonus meaning of *chatati*. Recall that when Judah says it to Jacob, he hasn't done anything wrong yet. He is anticipating a future state where he would have to say *chatati*. So *chatati* also might mean: I can anticipate how this action could go wrong and hurt you. It's not just looking back, after the fact, but also looking forward.

*Chatati*, "I have sinned," may be uncomfortable, alien language to us, but surely we can relate to these five alternate meanings. Use them as a guide to doing teshuvah this year:

I'm taking responsibility for this.

I see your pain.

I admit I was wrong, even if I would prefer not to.

I don't know how to fix this--perhaps this cannot be fixed--but I am here with you.

I can anticipate how this action could go wrong and hurt you.

I want to close with one last related piece of Torah. When Judah is asking Jacob to entrust him with Benjamin, he adds one more line that drives home for us the urgency of the moment. "*Lulei hitmahmahnu*, If we had not dragged our feet so much," he says, "*shavnu zeh pa'amayim*, we could have returned twice." It's cheeky, almost inappropriate after the weighty pledge he has just made; he's effectively saying, "We could have been there and back twice already, if you hadn't dragged this out so long." But he uses this funny word, *Lulei*, which means "if not" or "if only." It shows up prominently for us at the end of the Psalm for the Days of Awe. "*Lulei he'emanti lir'to betuv Adonai*, if only I had had faith that I would see God's goodness." *Lulei* is spelled lamed-vav-lamed-aleph. The Chasidic Rebbes instantly recognize that as an anagram of Elul, aleph-lamed-vav-lamed, the month leading up to Rosh Hashanah when we are supposed to begin doing teshuvah. In the book *Likutei Yehoshua*, printed in 1957, Rabbi Yehoshua Sheinfeld shares an interpretation of this verse that he says he heard one year on Rosh Hashanah from a certain unnamed tzaddik before shofar-blowing. He interprets Judah's whiny "*Shavnu zeh pa'amayim*" as "We could have done teshuvah twice." If only we had not delayed and dragged our feet so much during Elul, we could have been forgiven already on Rosh Hashanah! We're such ditherers! But, fortunately, we have a second opportunity for teshuvah in Tishrei, on Yom Kippur.

This is the moment to introspect and say *chatati*. To really mean it. And to quit dragging our feet as we walk the path of repentance, so we can earn that *salachti* that God promises.