

Are We Sinners?

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Many years ago, a family caught me in the hospital hall, before I walked into their loved one's room. The man was quite ill, and they didn't want me to enter, imagining that my presence would scare the patient. "He may think you're here to give him last rites," they said.

Judaism does not have Catholic-style last rites, a fact that this family and the man in that hospital bed knew well. Our tradition does, however, offer a prayer for the bedside of a person who is dying. It's called *Viddui*, and it means, "Confession." Judaism teaches that the gates of repentance remain open until a person's last breath. *Viddui* provides one final opportunity to seek forgiveness during this lifetime.

One time, I offered *Viddui* at the bedside of a dying congregant, whom I'll call "Sophie," not her real name. My version of *Viddui* for Sophie included these words: "We ask forgiveness for Sophie's sins. We who loved Sophie believe her sins to be few, and know her righteousness to be great. Still, we all sin; so we do ask forgiveness. Even more, we pray with faith that You, O God, will receive Sophie's precious and immortal soul for the glories of life everlasting, on account of her righteousness and Your loving mercy."

After the lady died, when I was meeting with the family to plan her funeral, one of her children remarked: "Rabbi, you asked forgiveness for mom's sins. I've got to tell you: I can't think of any!" It's true: "Sophie" was particularly praiseworthy. Still, her children's reaction was stereotypically Jewish. We may be a people afflicted with of guilt, but we're uncomfortable talking about sin.

The "problem" is Christianity – or, to be more specific, the extent to which Christian notions of sin pervade our culture. Christianity, of course, teaches original sin, meaning that we are all born in need of absolution. Judaism has no such notion, and therefore Jews often shy away from the word "sin."

On the other hand, neither Torah nor our Jewish tradition is bashful about sin. This week, we begin reading Leviticus. Our portion includes a section in which our ancestors are commanded to bring sacrifices in order to be absolved of their sins. It worked like this: The Israelite would come before the priest, confess the

sin, and present the animal to be offered. The blood of the sacrifice was understood to wash away the penitent's sin. The portion even prescribes offerings to blot out sins that the worshiper might have committed unwittingly, and therefore would be unable to confess. In other words, our ancestors would admit to being sinners even if they could not detail their transgressions.

One could say, then, that Judaism's view of sin isn't all that different from Christianity's. No, we don't believe that newborn babies are afflicted with sin. However, our tradition affirms that human life unavoidably includes sin. We all do it.

Earlier this week, I was at a sushi bar. One doesn't have to be an eavesdropper to overhear conversation two feet away. I was amused, because my two lunch companions' conversation clearly identified them as clergy, like me. "A rabbi and two Methodist pastors walk into a sushi bar," sounds like the beginning of a bad joke. They struck up a conversation with me, and I enjoyed meeting them. They finished their meal, and one of them asked for the check, saying "We're going Dutch." The waitress was befuddled. The pastor explained that he wanted separate checks; and then asked, "Are young people unfamiliar with that expression?" I explained: "It's like sitting 'Indian-style;' the younger generation has thankfully been raised to avoid terms suggesting that people of a specific ethnicity behave in a certain way."

To be fair, the origin of the term "Dutch treat" is not certain. It may derive from the Dutch door, split in two equal halves. Or it may come from the fact that folks in Belgium, neighbor to the Netherlands, revel in jokes about the alleged miserliness of the Dutch.

The point of the story in the context of tonight's sermon: If the pastor sinned by using the term "Dutch treat," his transgression was both a minor and accidental. The example also points to larger concern: None of us can truly walk in the shoes of people whose lives are very different from our own. All of us, from time to time, make comments that we do not intend as slurs based on race or ethnicity, religion or disability status, sexual orientation or gender identity. Nevertheless, we have said something hurtful, however unintentionally, and have therefore sinned.

Jews do not, of course, seek forgiveness in the way that our ancestors did, bringing the best of their flocks, herds, and fields to the Jerusalem Temple. In fact, our Christian neighbors' theology about absolution is much more like that of the

ancient Israelite priests than our own. In Christian theology, the blood of God's supreme sacrifice, spilt on the cross, absolves sin in the same way that the blood of sheep and bullocks did previously. Our ancient rabbis outlined a very different process for repentance at the same time that Christianity was developing. Our sages taught that the offerings of our lips would take the place of the offerings of our animals or grain. We find forgiveness by confessing our sins, by apologizing to anybody we have hurt, by praying for forgiveness; and by acts of *tzedakah* – righteous charitable giving intended to restore justice that we have perverted through our transgressions.

We sin when we speak hurtful words and when we forsake our Jewish heritage.

We sin when we cut corners in financial matters or betray our sanctified relationships.

We sin when we seek unfair advantage for ourselves or our children, and we sin when we have no intention to cause any harm.

We sin purposefully, and we sin ignorantly.

So yes, we are all sinners.

Blessedly, our faith has offered us ways to reconcile with God. Our Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur, is “prime time” for repairing our souls, but repentance is by no means limited to that holy day. Nor is it confined to a confession on our behalf when we lay dying. In the words of *Mishkan HaNefesh*, our High Holy Day prayer book, we seek forgiveness for “the ways we have wronged You deliberately and by mistake;” for “the ways we have wronged You openly and secretly;” and for the “harm we have caused in Your world by losing control.” Those words do come from our Yom Kippur liturgy, but they may be offered when surrounded by community or in private, aloud or silently, on Yom Kippur or on any day of the year, in our youth and as we approach that time in our lives when the gates of repentance will close one last time.

We all sin – even “Sophie,” whose children cherish their wonderful mother's memory. And we do all have a path back away from our wrongdoing, back into the eternally open arms of our God.

Amen.