



Yom Kippur Neilah D'var Torah – Sept. 25, 2023, 5784

By Sue Fendrick

The tekiah gedolah at the end of Neilah is a last moment of awakening for our souls, our final wail of teshuvah, our cry as we emerge like newborns into the world. Of all the things we do as modern Jews, blowing the shofar is probably the one that a Jew from ancient times, magically transported into the 21st century, would most recognize. “Wow,” she might have said on Rosh Hashanah, “a real ram’s horn! that plaintive sound!...It’s like I’m back at the Beit haMikdash¹! Nothing has changed in two millenia! It’s unbelievable--I can’t *wait* for the Avodah service on Yom Kippur!” [pause]

Uhm, sorry honey...

The set of rituals recounted in Seder haAvodah were the only time during the year that even the Kohen Gadol could enter the *kodesh hakodeshim*, the inner sanctum of the ancient Temple in which God’s presence was said to dwell. It is so singular that our tradition has us rehearsing it not once but twice on Yom Kippur in intimate detail: in this morning’s Torah reading, and in the Avodah service.

Of course, the entire infrastructure for its actual performance is gone. The Temple--check. Sacrifices--check. A functioning priesthood, with all its accoutrements, led by the Cohen Gadol? Check, check, and check. Gone.

Yet the awe, the fear, the sense that something real and transformative happened during Seder haAvodah² is palpable even in our own wordy, bloodless recitation. Now I know this isn’t true for everybody, but when I hear the words “*v’kach hayah omer...*” when I prostrate fully, I usually feel a shimmer of those ancient rituals--that in some small way *I* am the time traveler, that for the briefest moment, I too am at the Beit haMikdash, bathed in the joy of knowing that purification and forgiveness has

¹ I know that in grammatically correct Heblish one should say “the Beit Mikdash”, because “the Beit haMikdash” would mean “the The Temple”, but saying “the Beit haMikdash” is so common in Jewish English that it feels more important here to use a familiar way of speaking than to be technically correct..

² Also, technically Seder haAvodah describes the liturgy we now have, not the actual Temple rituals performed by the Cohen Gadol on Yom Kippur (or at least as depicted in Leviticus and in the Mishnah), I don’t know of any brief, widely recognized way to refer to those rituals.

taken place, not only for the Cohen Gadol himself and his family, and for the larger priesthood, but for the entire Jewish people.

The singularity of the Avodah service and its enormous depth as a ritual may draw us in--it also highlights just how much has changed, how far we are from the Beit haMikdash, how much the way we live our Jewish lives would be utterly unrecognizable to our visitor from Temple times--and how everything familiar to her has been replaced. Instead of the Beit haMikdash, we have each *mikdash m'at*—our congregations and our homes. Instead of the *kohanim*, the entire Jewish people is a *mamlechet kohanim*, a nation of priests--God's promise to us way back in Sefer Shemot, now a bit more literal. We have liturgical prayers that stand in for the various sacrifices, and *teshuvah*, *tefilah*, and *tzedakah* are the ways we atone.

But there is still something missing. Something else that gave the Avodah service its power. Something that doesn't have equivalent in *our* Yom Kippur—and that is, a place to locate *collective* and *institutional* atonement, a way to focus on our sins as members of larger groups and participants in societal institutions, and a way to imagine repair and change on *those* levels.

Is there is a meeting point between the ancient institutional ritual and our current emphasis on personal teshuvah? Is there a way that Yom Kippur can still speak to us about institutional and systemic housecleaning?

Much has been made of the plural phrasing of the confessions in Ashamnu and Al Chet. Some say that this reminds us of sins we might not have thought about, and provides cover if we've committed sins that are hard to admit--and that we often bear some responsibility for the sins of others, whether by aiding and abetting, failing to call them out, or playing to their weaknesses.

But I learned something about this that is so radical and yet so obvious from my friend and colleague Rabbi Minna Bromberg. She is the founder and president of Fat Torah, which works to end weight stigma in Jewish communal life and build connections with sacred texts and traditions in ways that foster body liberation. She offers this powerful observation: this litany of plural language that points us toward *institutional and societal* sins, the sins we commit collectively and structurally.

It takes little imagination to consider how various institutions, say, harden their hearts, engage in deceptive business practices, or resort to violence (to name a few greatest hits from *Al Chet*). And when we think about the role that institutions have in facilitating or turning a blind eye to the wrong acts of individuals within their purview—well, suddenly sexual impropriety, damaging speech, and oppressive behavior become not just things that individual bad actors do, but that groups and institutions have to own.

And we as individuals have to call our institutions and systems to an ever-deepening process of awareness and repair. *Al chet shechatanu*.

Last year, the Union for Reform Judaism released a report documenting over many decades harassment, sexual misconduct, and abuse in its institutions, “as well as the failure to respond institutionally,” as they said, “compounding the ripples of pain.” It has done serious institutional work to right these wrongs. On the occasion of the Union’s 150th anniversary, its leadership felt it was wrong to merely celebrate without also noting its “shortcomings, missteps, and failures to live out [their] most sacred values.” And so a few days ago they issued an organizational *Al Chet*, which names failings of organizational culture and practice. For example, “For the sin we committed by not acting swiftly to take responsibility for the acts of sexual or other harassment and abuse that have taken place in our institutions.”

Accountability expressed in the *spirit* of new liturgy, but answering the most ancient of calls. *Al chet shechatanu.*

This morning’s haftarah makes it clear that a fast of merely abstaining from food without changing our ethical behavior is laughable in God’s eyes. *This is the fast I have chosen*, says God: to end oppression of workers, to give food to those who are hungry, to house the unhoused and clothe the naked...None of these can be accomplished solely by our own tzedakah, however generous, or individual ethical choices. Like so many social ills, these demand collective work, institutional and political response—but first, that we see and name clearly and specifically where we as a society are falling short.

When we think about institutional change, we don’t need to limit our focus to established organizations with boards of directors, political movements with platforms, or the huge terrain of big “isms”.

Language, too, is a kind of collective institution—one that both reflects where we are as a society, and helps us get there. Here is a small example: I remember the first time I heard someone, instead of “slaves”, use the language of “enslaved people”. It was kind of a light-bulb moment. That small change shines light on the wider humanity of these human beings. They don’t have some core unchangeable status. The phrase “enslaved people” also shines light on the actions and the evil institution of slavery--which still exists today—is perpetrated by *some* human beings, and facilitated and permitted by *others*. People have to be doing enslaving, for someone to be a slave.

Language can wake us up, or create new conditions. In our *kehillah*, when our gabbais say *na la’amod* to those coming up for an *aliyah* to the Torah, using the gender-neutral infinitive, we avoid God forbid embarrassing someone by calling them up by the wrong gender. In a small way, this communal practice contributes to an environment in which people of any gender expression can feel comfortable. And, until it becomes totally rote, it also gets us thinking more widely about kind and just practices around gender identity.

Let me just acknowledge that it’s *hard* to think about collective and institutional teshuvah. Among other things, it means coordinating with other people; it can mean challenging those with power and changing established or entrenched practices; it can be complicated and feel

amorphous. It's work that is often done publicly, or at least for which we are publicly accountable.

But working on the level of institutional and collective change *does* mean that we are never working alone. That can help us avoid being cynics who feel that it is all too broken for us to get much done. So can starting with an issue to which we have a personal connection, for which we feel a certain culpability, or where we feel particularly able to help facilitate change.

In her poem "The low road", the great Jewish poet Marge Piercy speaks to the importance of joining with others in working on social change: "Alone, you can fight...but they roll over you...But two people can keep each other sane, can give support, conviction, love, hope---Three people are a delegation, a committee, a wedge. With four you can play bridge and start an organization. With six you can rent a whole house, eat pie for dinner with no seconds, and hold a fundraising party. A dozen make a demonstration..." And so on. *Ahat. Ahat va-ahat. Ahat v'shtayim...*

In Neilah, time is short. There's no *Al Chet*, only *Ashamnu*, a mantra of collective responsibility. Its A-Z (or really, *aleph* to *tav*) structure hints that this is a mere reminder of the entire range of sins and teshuva opportunities. *Ashamnu, bagadnu, gazalnu. Nu, Nu—nu?* Collectively, we sin. Collectively, we have to work on fixing what is broken. That, too, is teshuvah.

In these final hours of Yom Kippur, as we sit and stand here in our weary bodies, the boundaries of our egos and our souls dissolve a little. As our voices soar together, we can feel our collective power. The day is short, the work is great, and the Master of the House is knocking at the doors of our hearts³. In the coming year, may we discern where we can make a difference in addressing the collective sins of our broken world, and the find the strength to act with honesty and bravery and vision --*l'hayyim tovim u-l'shalom*, for life, for good, for peace. *Ken yehi ratzon.*

³ From Pirkei Avot 2:15. The phrase "on the doors of our hearts" is not in the original.