

## Selichot 2023 / 5783 Study Session at Temple Israel of Alameda

### Source Sheet Created by Rabbi Cynthia Minster

#### **Selichot are Penitential Prayers.**

What are we apologizing for? To Whom?

**Cheshbon HaNefesh**, taking an accounting of the soul, is the inner work of reflecting on our lives and being honest with ourselves about where we failed to live up to the values we hold most important. We must be clear on what our values are and have a way to set our egos aside long enough to take stock of our lives. This is not about self-flagellation. This is about self-improvement. This is about recognizing failure as a part of life.

First, we must forgive ourselves for not living up to our own standards.

Then, we must recognize how we have hurt others through our failures. We must humbly apologize to them with specificity and reparations, in order to be worthy of returning to alignment with the Divine. G!d cannot forgive us for the ways we hurt other people. While no one is required to forgive us for the harm we cause, we are required to apologize and make restitution.

The below quotes are meant to guide us towards creating personal meaning out of the High Holy Days.

What holds us back from participating fully in this process?

How can the Jewish calendar help us live fully into our own lives?

What is the first step we want to take to live into our own depths?

How can this community help us deepen our connection to our souls?

## **Estrangement**

These prayers help us recognize our estrangement from G!d, our estrangement from ourselves, our estrangement from the people we love, and our estrangement from Judaism. How do we choose to return to the path of goodness and truth? Do we want to return? What holds us back from this work?

Based on *This is Real and You Are Completed Unprepared* by Rabbi Alan Lew (Back Bay Books, 2018), 101.

We have overestimated the efficacy of our conscious behavior, and we have underestimated the persistence and the depth of our destructive tendencies.

Lew, 107.

## **Estrangement From Prayer**

By mistakenly treating prayer books as scientific textbooks worshipers were led either to denounce or to defend their prayers as they found them...It is easy to assume, therefore, that religious believers have escaped ordinary intelligence—as if science speaks truths, art suggests them, and religion trashes them. We will never find our way through the complexities of prayer if we do not grant that its writers were souls like us, who marveled at nature’s grandeur, questioned the persistence of evil, and held out for a G!d of ultimate meaning—even when the world seemed mired in the muck of desperation.

“Prayers of Awe, Institutions of Wonder,” by Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman, PhD in *Who By Fire, Who By Water* edited by Rabbi Lawrence A Hoffman, PhD (Jewish Lights Publishing, 2013), 7.

“Awe” after all, has a dual sense—it evokes both wonderment and dread.

Hoffman, 11.

Liturgy is sacred drama.

Hoffman, 11.

## **The Goal of the High Holy Days**

If it is the High Holy Days, we are to leave with the conviction that we are indeed mortal beings; that we do balance good and evil, sometimes giving in to the latter at the expense of the former; that there is indeed a divine presence before whom we stand; and that we can, with proper repentance and resolve, wipe the slate clean and begin anew with all the promise of a world re-created, a child reborn, a mind reformed, and a conscience reawakened. Hoffman, 11-12.

## **Writing Precedes Creation**

Writing precedes creation and is, arguably, the most transcendent way that G!d communicates with us. "God as the Ultimate Writer," by Dr. Erica Brown in *Who By Fire, Who By Water*, 90.

## **Repentance, Prayer, Charity**

Repentance starts with our relationship with the self, prayer addresses our relationship with G!d, and charity works on our relationship with others. In other words, repentance is inner-directed, prayer is G!d-directed, and charity is other-directed. The first involves the mind, the second the tongue, and the third the hand advancing from thought to word to deed. Adversity is most disruptive when striking those bereft of religious and social support systems. All the more reason to recite *Un'taneh Tokef* in community. Putting ourselves in order, repairing our relationship with G!d, and working on improving our relationship with others help us overcome our isolation. By enhancing our capacity to withstand the vicissitudes of life, we gain the confidence to believe that this too will pass. Repentance means we care enough about ourselves to strive for our ideal self. Prayer means we care enough about G!d to make ourselves worthy of G!d's assessment. Charity means we care enough about others to help them in their need. Otherwise, faced with tragedy, we might give up on ourselves, on G!d, and on others. "How Does the *Un'taneh Tokef* Mean," by Dr. Reuven Kimelman in *Who By Fire, Who By Water*, 105.

## **Fight For a Life Of Meaning Today**

Our tradition, in all its wisdom, demands that we obliterate the false protective shelter and, knowing that each moment might be our last, fight for a life of meaning *today*. "At the Edge of the Abyss," by Rabbi Sharon Brous in *Who By Fire, Who By Water*, 143.

## **What Is Sin?**

Sin can be something carried, but it can also be something else. The word *het* [חט] appears in Judges 20:16 to describe a stone missing its mark. Although the term *nosa avon* [נש און] describes the heaviness of sin, the word *het* describes sin as a missed opportunity. Here sin serves as a foil for a target, likely man's own self-actualization. If self-development and actualization are the objective, sin is when that objective remains unmet.

*Sin.a.gogue: Sin and Failure in Jewish Thought*, by David Bashevkin.  
Cherry Orchard Books: 2019, 5.

Adam was not pro-sin, he was pro-choice. A world completely subsumed by Godliness, while sublime, would be missing a crucial component—a visceral sense of choice. (Bashevkin, 17)

## **Arguing is a Foundation of Judaism**

Protesting and theological argumentation are markedly Jewish exercises. While such acts may be seen as dogmatic blasphemy...protesting God is really a product of a rich experiential relationship with God. (Bashevkin, 69)

Genesis Rabbah 54:3 states: "Love without rebuke is not love."

## **Inviting God Back**

God allowed us to sin with such ease. God created an imperfect world with the capacity for failure. Like the moon, human light is diminished and casts only a faint luminescence. God laments, "Is there more I could have done to help the son avoid sinning?"

If this is divine remorse, then divine repentance is where God draws closer to man. Or as Rabbi Zadok explains, God generates within man thoughts of repentance that would have otherwise been lost. When someone becomes so distant from spirituality that even thoughts of remorse seem unattainable, God can still reach out and whisper to return. God's repentance allows man to return when return seems impossible. Through His prophets, God gives people an assurance: "Return unto Me and I will return to you" (Malakhi 3:7). It is not just man who can become distant—so can God. And just as every person can return, God can also return. (Bashevkin, 71)

## **Good apologies mend the social fabric.**

*Sorry, Sorry, Sorry: The Case for Good Apologies* by Marjorie Ingall and Susan McCarthy (Gallery Books, 2023), 23.

Social fabric: none of us is on our own, we're all woven together in this world. (Ingall & McCarthy, 23)

## **Four Reasons Not To Apologize**

1. You don't mean it.
2. It would hurt the other person.
3. The other person doesn't want to hear from you.
4. The other person is demanding too many apologies.

Ingall & McCarthy, 26

A good apology corrects an imbalance, respects a person's value, and takes away an insult. A bad apology makes things worse. (Ingall & McCarthy, 27)

## **How to Apologize**

1. Say you're sorry.
2. For what you did.
3. Demonstrate that you understand the impact and know why what you did was hurtful.
4. Offer explanation (if relevant) but no excuses.
5. Make clear why what you did won't happen again.
6. Make reparations.

Six and a half. LISTEN.

Ingall & McCarthy, 41

To reiterate: a good apology is not All About You. Giving your narcissism free reign by blaming others, saying how you've suffered, touting your long record of being awesome, accusing people of not understanding your intentions—these behaviors cheapen any apology you manage to make and say more about your arrogance than your humility.

Ingall & McCarthy, 243

## **Steps of Repentance According to Maimonides**

1. Naming and Owning Harm
2. Starting to Change
3. Restitution and Accepting Consequences
4. Apology
5. Making Different Choices

*On Repentance and Repair: Making Amends in an Unapologetic World*, Danya Ruttenberg (Beacon Press, 2022) 26-46.

## **Apology Without Repentance Is Void**

A confession of harm is only regarded as part of the repentance process when someone actually intends to do the work. Maimonides says that someone who confesses their sins but “has not abandoned sin in their heart” is like someone who becomes immersed in the ritual bath while holding a lizard—the living waters cannot purify as intended if someone is clutching a non-kosher creepy-crawly that will invalidate the whole process. Nothing is accomplished. It’s a waste of everyone’s time and effort. If a person is not resolved, in the deep places of their being, that they’re done doing the harmful thing—or if, even worse, they’re *still doing it*—then the verbal confession isn’t valid. It’s not a step on the pathway to repentance. Ruttenberg, 31-32.

If we ask a perpetrator to engage too early with their victim—before they’ve confronted the seriousness of their actions and their impact, before they’ve begun working to change—the likelihood of their causing additional harm, rather than meaningful repair, is much higher. Ruttenberg, 38.

Addressing harm is possible only when we bravely face the gap between the story we tell ourselves—the one in which we’re the hero, fighting the good fight, doing our best, behaving responsibly and appropriately in every context—and the reality of our actions. We need to summon the courage to cross the bridge over that cognitively dissonant gulf and face who we are, who we have been—even if it threatens our story of ourselves. It’s the only way we can even begin to undertake any possible repair of the harm we’ve done and become the kind of person who might do better next time. (And that, in my opinion, is what’s truly heroic.) Ruttenberg, 49.