



**SERMON KOL NIDRE:
THE SINS WE HAVE COMMITTED**

Gabriel Webber, Tuesday 11 October 2016
Eastbourne Liberal Jewish Community

- 1 Could everyone turn to page 198¹ for a moment? Just to have a peep. You'll see that, on that page, you confessed to sinning of your own free choice.
- 2 We've done a lot of confessing this evening. If you turn over to page 199, we confessed to sinning in our hearts. On 200 we confessed to groundless hatred, and tomorrow, on page 262, we'll confess to obeying criminal orders.
- 3 Back on page 197 we even confessed that we have committed a whole lakeful of sins from corruption to violence. The list is a Hebrew acrostic: one sin starting with alef, one with bet, and so on. Once I ran a children's service where I asked them to come up with an English alphabet of sin. They found the letter B deceptively easy – 'being rude', 'being lazy', 'being naughty' – and for X, a tiny six-year-old girl yelled out, "Xenophobia!" But for Z they could only come up with 'zebra-poaching'.
- 4 But here in our machzorim we have an alphabet of proper, serious sins. I suspect that nobody in this room has done every single item

on the list. (I won't risk putting it to a show of hands.) Perhaps we haven't even got them all covered between us.

5 So why recite it?

6 These sections of the Yom Kippur service, known as the Vidui ('confession') or Al Chet ('our sins'), are some of the most vivid and explicit in Jewish liturgy. And they capture many people's imagination. In Israel, in the weeks leading up to the High Holy Days, magazines and newspapers and the internet fill up with custom, modernised versions of the passages,² such as one website's published response to a spate of nasty road accidents: "We did not stop at red lights. We did not lower our high-beam headlights. We did not wear our reflective vests." Political groups also use them, on both left ("For the sin we have committed by denying fair housing to our black and brown communities") and right ("For the sin we have committed by employing non-Jews").

7 But the thing about all of those 'confessions' is that they're not really confessions. They were written by one set of people for another set of people. I have no doubt that the left-wing campaigners are enormously dedicated to the cause of refugees, and that the right-wing campaigners are scrupulous in refusing to employ non-Jews. They're not guilty of the sins they were writing about – and they know it. They were commenting on current ills in society: or,

crucially, on what they consider to be ills inflicted on society by other people.

8 I'm reminded of the episode of the BBC sitcom *Outnumbered*³ in which 9-year-old Karen announced her new year's resolution to be: "Mummy will stop nagging me." And she wouldn't accept, couldn't understand, that a new year's resolution isn't supposed to be on someone else's perceived behalf.

9 Those who treat the Vidui, the Yom Kippur confession, as a stick to beat others while implicitly trumpeting their own virtues, are making the same mistake Karen did.

10 So back to the question of the day: our own Liberal Judaism machzor asks us to confess to having been "obstinate, vicious and destructive" and the rest of it. If we haven't done it, why confess to it?

11 One explanation might be 'agent-regret', the feeling we have when something bad happens which isn't our fault but when we still feel guilty.

12 Last month, I went to St Pancras station to welcome a 17-year-old Syrian refugee off the train.

13 He had old hands. Such a young face, but old, calloused, hands. Watching him reunite with his uncle, I felt guilty that my government was using my tax revenue to hire lawyers in an attempt

to keep child refugees out of the country. It's not my fault in any way, but I still feel bad about it. That's agent-regret. "We have been perverse and corrupt..."

14 Another idea is that of group guilt. We, collectively, have done the things printed in the machzor – if not us here in Eastbourne, then us the Jewish people, us the human race. Even if we are not personally guilty, we are complicit in our fellow humans' wrongdoing unless we spent our year actively striving to prevent it; "One who has the ability to protest the sins of their world but does not do so is accountable for the sins of their world."⁴

15 I find it important to think these thoughts each and every time I recite the Vidui. I find it meaningless otherwise. Were I not to think about my place in the sins of the world, I think I would just automatically revert to saying to myself, "Betrayed? Nope. Robbed? Nope. Violent? Nope."

16 Just as sin is personal, confession is personal. We'll come to the Vidui several more times this Yom Kippur. On those occasions, do whatever it is that will help you get the most out of the reflective opportunity that prayer offers us. You can focus on the words on the page. You can read the words but take your mind elsewhere. You can be silent and think your own customised confession. You can

make a mental checklist of those you've wronged and think of how to make it up to them.

- 17 The right answer to the question, "So why recite it?" is, there is no right answer. And this is our chance to find our own right answer, and to find our own way. Kein y'hi ratzon: may this be God's will.

Check against delivery.

GW 11.10.16

¹ Machzor Ruach Chadashah

² Examples mostly drawn from
<https://www.academia.edu/8062679/Al_Chet_in_Israeli_Culture_Israeli_Confessions_over_Everything?auto=download>

³ 27 December 2009

⁴ Shabbat 54b-55a