

HIDE AND SEEK: The Serious Game of T'shuvah

A Sermon by Rabbi Harold M. Schulweis

Temple Valley Beth Shalom, Encino, CA

Yom Kippur 2010 / 5771

We hide from ourselves, and must seek what is hidden. Repentance is self-discovery in silence; T'shuvah is belief in the capacity, competence and courage to change.

It is told of the Rhiziner Rebbe, that once when he came home from his shtiebel, he found outside his home a little boy crying. "Why are you crying, my son?"

"Because I was playing hide and seek," the boy answered.

"Why the tears, then?"

"Because I was hiding. But no one was seeking."

Later, the Rhiziner sensed in the child's hide-and-seek story lay the secret of *t'shuvah*: Something there is we hide which no one is seeking. Not even we ourselves.

There are many unsuspected hiding places. Sometimes we hide by mixing in with the crowd, by drowning out our own cries in the noise of others.

Sometimes we can hide by exposing ourselves on MySpace, Twitter, and Facebook; by blogging, texting. We lose our privacy.

We hide in our transparency. We hide from our loneliness by engaging in unending trivial conversation, caught up in a culture of fast-moving thumbs, facile, fleeting, furious, frenetic.

Even in reciting the *Ashamnu* out loud we can disguise our transgressions. Remember during Yom Kippur, we pray the *Ashamnu confession*, not only once or twice, but ten times throughout the 25 hours of Yom Kippur. But the tradition instructs us that the *Ashamnu* and the *Al Chet* litany must be recited both out loud and silently. Why the repetition and why the silent confession? Because, more than the spoken

public confession, we fear silence!! In silence there is no one to speak to except yourself.

It is easier to confess publicly. We sing out loud "*Ashamnu, bagadnu, gazalnu*" — "We" have sinned, "we" have stolen, "we" have betrayed — because we are responsible for each other. Public confession in keeping with the tradition that warns us "*al tifrosh min harabim*" — "Do not separate yourself from the community."

But there is a private, silent introspective, retrospective confession that is more intimidating. *Al tifrosh min ha-yachid* — "Do not separate oneself from yourself." The silent confession is not to be heard by the neighbor who sits beside me. In the rabbinic codes *Orach Chayim* (607:3) we are instructed "Do not confess out loud any individual sin that is not included in the public confession."

The silent confession is confidential. No one knows the secrets of my heart: Not my wife, or my husband, or my father, or my mother, or my son, or my daughter, my grandchildren, my family, or my friends. I can fool them all. I can put on a happy face. I can fool the camera.

The photographer tells me "Smile," but my heart is not in a humorous frame of mind. But the photographer persists. He wants me to appear happy. He says, "Say cheese" (or if he's an Israeli, "Say *gevinah*"). I open my lips. I bare my teeth. He presses the button on the camera, and when he looks at the snapshot, he thinks he has captured my happiness. He thinks he has caught my joy. But all he has caught is my mouthing the word "cheese." That's not me.

I can fool the camera. I find it more difficult to fool myself. Silent prayer, introspective prayer, personal prayer of *t'shuvah* is especially penetrating. The *Al Chet* litany call for deeper self-revelation. There is not one single reference to ritual observance. Not a word about keeping kosher or keeping the Sabbath or the Festivals or coming to the synagogue in the confession. Is ritual observance unimportant in Jewish life? Why were they not included? The rabbis sought in the self-confessional *Al Chet* something else, something beyond ritual observance, something even beyond the cardinal sins.

So Maimonides — the most important 12th century philosopher and codifier of Jewish laws — writes in his *Laws of Repentance* (7:3): “Do not think that you only need to repent for sinful deeds such as fornication or robbery or theft.” You are to repent for what lies behind these acts, such as your hot temper; hatred; jealousy; quarrelling; scoffing; mindless pursuit of wealth and honors; greediness; envy; rage, stubbornness; your hardness of your heart; your blindness to the needs of other people. Why these character dispositions and not misdeeds?

Because, “They are graver than sinful acts because when one is addicted to them it is difficult to give them up.” What is the aim of *t’shuvah*? Change! Not of the other, not that others may love me. But that I may come to love my changed self.

The philosopher poet W.H. Auden understood two different motives of change: “The image of myself which I try to create in my own mind in order that I may love myself is very different from the image which I try to create in the mind of others in order that they may love me.” Change — not to gain Papa’s approval, or Mama’s approval, or my competitors’ approval, or public applause.

It’s easy to join the choir, follow the chazzan, and sing out loud “*Ashamnu, bagadnu, gazalnu.*” But in the silent prayer the “we” becomes “me,” “ours” becomes “mine,” “us” becomes “I,” a new moral grammar emerges: *Ashamti, bagaditi, gazalti* — “I” have sinned, “I” have stolen, “I” have betrayed. “I... I... I....”

So, the Jewish ritual law of confession states that when you recite the *Al Chet*, you are not to lean on anything or anyone. Not just physically, but emotionally. Stand on your own. Not the injury done to others is to be repaired. It is the injury to myself that is at stake. And I alone will decide, at the end of the day, whether I am forgiven.

For how do I know at Neilah time that I am forgiven? Who speaks the verdict, “You are absolved”? I can know the verdict only after I have confronted my angel, wrestled it, prevailed and received a new, and earned self-forgiveness.

Our father Jacob did this. He wrestled with his conscience in the darkness until the break of dawn. He repented of his past until he heard from within: No longer shall you cleave to your brother’s heel, no longer shall you live disguised in your brother’s

clothes and deceive your blind father. You have given birth to a new name — Israel — for you have struggled with God and man and you have prevailed.

The hardest command in the bible is *U'mibsarecha lo titalem* — “Do not hide from your own flesh.” “I would I might forget that I am I” (Santayana). I find ways to recuse myself, to excuse myself, to exempt myself, to find alibis.

“Look, I am what I am, and if you only knew my father or my mother or my step-parents, or my brother or my sister, you’d understand what I am and why I act in this strangely hurtful way.”

But in silence an inner voice talks back to me. “You can blame your parents for the pain you feel, but you can’t blame your parents for the pain you cause others.” Stop hiding.

So I turn to shrewder ways to hide. “Come on, don’t be a fool. Everybody does it. The birds do it, the bees do it, even great celebrities do it; let’s do it too. Politicians do it, businessmen do it, financiers on Wall Street do it.” I join. Cut a little corner, prevaricate a little.

“Besides which, Lord, I’m too old, too frail to change now. It’s too late. The past is the past; let it be.” So, I put the lid on my coffin and remain alive, prematurely buried.

I have a theological rationalization under which I hide: “It’s all divinely predetermined. God made me. God decrees my fate and my choices, my destiny. But Maimonides, in his Laws of Repentance, Chapter 5, writes:

“Let not the notion expressed by foolish gentiles and foolish Jews pass your mind. That your Almighty decrees that at the beginning of a person’s existence who is to be either righteous or evil is so determined.” This is not so. Every human being may become as righteous as Moses, or as wicked as Jeroboam, wise or foolish, merciful or cruel, stingy or generous. No one coerces him. Maimonides adds: If one has injured affliction upon himself let him weep for, bewail what he has done to his soul and how he has mistreated it. The Creator does not put compulsion on the children of human beings. It is all left to you.

But in private, a voice from within cries out “No!! That’s not the whole me!” I don’t want to be remembered this way. I don’t want to appear this way. Not to my family, not to my friends, not to my congregation. I am better than that. I am softer than that. I am kinder than that. I am more loving than that.

- I know how I feel when I take the hand of the frightened woman lying in terror in the hospice.
- I know my dignity when helping this broken man who has lost his job.
- I know how the simplest verbal compliment spoken in the ear of a scared child can give her a new heart and a new spirit.

My horizons are too small, my ambitions too shallow. I am more. How do I know? I know the tug of an invisible cord that ties me to my Jewish identity, my sensibility and idealism. From where did it come — the restlessness, this aspiration to become? There is in me a moral impulse we read today from the prophet: “Cry with full throat.”

“Does God want your fasting, the starving of your bodies, the bowing of your head, the lying in sackcloth and ashes?” God wants more from you. My hiding self calls me to a new heart, a new soul, a new meaning to my life.

Unlock the chains of wickedness

Untie the cords of the yoke

Let the oppressed go free

Break off every yoke

Share your bread with the hungry

Shelter the poor

Clothe the naked

Do not hide from your own self.

This is the voice of *t’shuvah*, turning that insists on my becoming. The whole history of your people from slavery in Egypt to this day is the story of becoming. When Moses insists that God reveals his name, God does not say, “I was what I was” or “I am

what I am." But "*Eyeh asher eyeh — I will be what I will be.*" I, God, I change. I, God, I repent. I, God I forgive. I, God, can change. I become. I grow. *Eyeh asher eyeh.*" And so must I.

On Yom Kippur, we read the Haftorah of the prophet Jonah who is the epitome of the "hider." Jonah hides from God's demand that he, the Jewish prophet, should go to the pagan citizens of Ninveh and prophesy their destruction by God because of their sinful ways. Jonah hides, turns his back on God out of devotion to God. Jonah is afraid that the people of Ninveh will repent and that therefore God will repent. And that divine change would compromise the God who Jonah believes is inflexible, infallible, immovable, unchanging. God is moved by Ninveh's repentance and God Himself repents.

Jonah is frustrated. He wants a God who is implacable, a God who cannot be swayed by human contrition.

The book of Jonah teaches us that God can be moved and can be changed. If God can change, if Ninveh can change, so can I. That is the hope and blessing of my free will, the capacity to grow, evolve, overcome, change.

This is the sacred humanism of Judaism engraved in the Bible's Genesis of nature and human nature. God creates heaven and earth, sun, moon, stars, fish, fowl, beasts and all by fiat. God says, "*Yehi*" — "Let there be" and with that the world is created. Except the creation of the human being. Here God says, "Let us make the human in our image." Who is this "us"? Angels, demi-gods? The "us" refers to us human beings. God needs man and woman to become what they can be through their free-will, potentiality, and possibility. The human being is no passive creature, but one who is indispensable for his or her creative evolution.

Here are the traits of humanity in the words of the philosopher and Talmudist, Rabbi J.B. Soloveitchik:

"You, child of man, are your creator, you are your innovator, you are your redeemer, you are your messiah to redeem yourself from the darkness of exile to the

light of personal redemption.”

To what end the silent confession ? So that you can leave the synagogue, and declare two revolutionary words in the silence of your heart: *Ani acher* — “I am another.” I am not the same.

I have asked myself, “What does it mean to become another?” I have often been asked: What does Jewish faith believe in another life, in the afterlife. “What happens to me when I die?” I began to think about the radical idea of the capacity to become “another,” to do *t’shuvah*. Is that not afterlife here on earth? When I do *t’shuvah*, when I change, do I not gain for myself a second life while I am alive? I am another, not in another world,” but in this world. I am reborn, not after I die, but while I am alive through my own moral resolution and resurrection.

Not after life, but during my life, I extend my life by becoming another. There are two ways to a “this-worldly” afterlife. One is what the sages called “*t’shuvah m’yirah*” — repentance out of fear: Fear of being caught, fear of the testimony of witnesses, the fear of jury and judge and incarceration. Out of fear and trembling, I will repay my debts, but I remain a scared, scarred, sullen, soured soul.

The other way of rebirth the sages called *t’shuvah m’ahavah* — repentance out of love: not out of fear of being punished, but out of love — out of love of myself as I may be, can be, and ought to be.

Repentance out of love begins with yourself. “Love the other as Thyself,” for without love of self, remorse — from the Latin *remordele*, to “bite again” — is self-lacerating. In Hebrew, remorse is sculpting. “*Charatah*” — from the root “*cheret*” — a stylus used to sculpt a nobler image of yourself.

In your self, a community of selves lies hidden. Seek into yours, and you will find “another” among them.

Harold M. Schulweis ©2010 This document, or any portion thereof, may not be reproduced without the written permission of the author