IYUN VIDUI KOL NIDREI 5779

Confession is as Jewish as the Bible is (i.e., very Jewish).

"If a man or woman commits any sins against another man . . . they should confess the sin they committed [before G-d]."—The Bible1

Maimonides understands this command as a requirement for one who has sinned "to confess with one's lips and state verbally those things [regret and repentance] which one has resolved in one's heart."2

One thing that has always puzzled me about vidui (Jewish confession) is that this final step in the process of teshuvah—and a positive mitzvah unto itself!—seems meaningless.

What's the point of vocalizing our thoughts of remorse to G-d? Aren't the thoughts and feelings deep within the recesses of our minds and hearts revealed before G-d like an open book?

But what if the purpose of confession is not for G-d's sake, but for our own?

It strikes me that no matter how critical or "objective" we try to be of ourselves, we are blinded by pride which, according to King Solomon, "prevents us from seeing our own shortcomings."

In other words, we go about life viewing ourselves from the inside. Through speaking out our shortcomings in vidui, however, we step into the mind (and ears) of an outsider, and only then does the severity and foolishness of our deeds hit us like a ton of bricks.

"Did I really think/say/do that?" we may wonder. "How could I have fallen so low?"

It's like looking back at a hurtful text we sent someone a week earlier in the heat of an angry exchange. It doesn't make sense anymore. It was harsh, petty and pointless. It's like viewing a video of ourselves acting distastefully.

And that's the point of Jewish confession. It's not spoken for G-d to hear, and it's not spoken to the next person for him to absolve us; it is, rather, an acknowledgement to ourselves about ourselves—that sadly we lost our way, slipped into a blind spot with our judgment clouded over by a passing "lapse of judgement" But luckily, with G-d's help, we merited a moment of clarity just in time.

The power and beauty of vidui is not that we shame ourselves before others, but that we shame our foolish selves in the full view and awareness of our true selves.