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Why are we confessing our misdeeds on Yom Kippur? Ten times in the services of Kol Nidre and Yom Kippur we confess our sins. The prayers are known as the *Al Chet*, which lists the transgressions, and the *Vidui*, which is a confession of general categories.

How did this practice come about? Until the Babylonian exile, we had a *bet hamkidash*, a holy temple. The holy temple was God's home on this earth. There we atoned with animal sacrifice. There was no exact formula for reflection and remorse and recompense. We killed animals.

But then the Babylonians marched into Jerusalem. The Temple was destroyed and the leaders among the people were exiled to Babylon. In Babylon there was no temple, no house where God rests, and a seemingly broken promise by God that the line of King David will endure. What is an ancient people to do? Most ancient peoples would have said that their God was a weak God. They would look to the conquerors and say, their God must be stronger than our God. And the conquered nation would worship the God of the conquerors.

But not us, not the Hebrews, not the Israelites. We turned. We did *teshuvah*. We said, as a people and as a religious group that we should have listened to the prophets. The Prophet Jeremiah who warned us that God would punish us for not observing God's laws. God was serious, our God is the only God, and that God, the God of Israel is reacting to our failings.

How do we make up for our failings? What did the exiled people in Babylonia do without a Temple for sacrifice? In the book of Daniel, we learn what they did. They said *ASHAMNU*, *BAGADNU*, we have blundered, we have stumbled, we have committed wrongdoing AND we are sorry! When we say *Al Chet* and *Vidui* in this service, we are carrying on a tradition

of 2,600 years. **With those words we acknowledge that our relationship with God is as much about what we do in our lives as it is about what God sets in motion in this world.**

We are partners with God in how we act and all that we say. And we move closer to God when we say we were wrong and so we acknowledge it and say *ASHAMU, BAGADNU* . . .

By the time we reach Yom Kippur, we should have asked for forgiveness from others for the errors we have made and for the harm we have caused. On Yom Kippur, we are left to seek forgiveness from God. With the confessional prayers, *al chet, vidui*, we are now acknowledging to God, that when we insult another person, cheat another person, lie to another person, **we are also moving away from holiness, and turning our back on God.** We have decreasing holiness in this world when we permit ourselves to slide toward immoral and harmful behaviors.

But acknowledging that we have done wrong isn't enough. We have a list of 44 offenses in the *al chet*. And they are expressed in the plural. We are a collective in this endeavor of admitting our errors and our misdeeds. We say "we" because all of Israel is responsible for one another. It is "us" because none of us should be eager to excuse ourselves from any sin listed, whether we know we have done that sin or not. It is communal because if the person next to us is violating the rules, we are morally complicit if we don't act on behalf of all of us to make the world a better place. It is plural because as a collective our prayers are stronger.

I have spoken in general about the formula of *al chet* and *vidui*. It is really hard to tackle 44 separate transgressions in the course of a 25-hour day of fasting. There is a story told of the rabbinic student who complains to Rabbi Greenberg, a vice chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary. It is after the high holidays and the student says that the list of sins

of the *al chet* is too long, he can barely read them all in the time allotted in the service no less comprehend them and give them his full attention. The revered teacher and rabbi replies, "Of course it is. I haven't said them all in years." The student is appalled and questions the rabbi as to how he can be selective. The rabbi replies that once he comes to a sin in the list that he recognizes as a personal character flaw or behavior he must work on, he focuses so hard on that one sin, the rest of the people have finished reciting the whole list.

AND, like Rabbi Greenberg in the story, we can focus on a single offense or problem if we can't fathom them all at once. I came upon one that I want to focus on with you. And THE one I want to focus on is featured prominently these days in the news. It is cheating and lying.

Cheating and lying is pervasive in our society, in our country and in our world. And it is having a serious affect on us all. Here are some examples of the depth of the problem coming out of academia, the place where young adults have the opportunity to select careers and set out on lifetime paths of achievement.

This year it was revealed that many universities doctored the numbers they report for test scores to influence their rankings in lists of top universities. Those schools are choosing dishonesty over integrity.

125 students in a government course taught at Harvard last year were caught cheating. Harvard is often called Man's Greatest University. The best and brightest students in the world weighed the alternatives between honest hard work and a quick route to a result and chose cheating.

A perfect sounding kid named Adam (Wheeler) applied for a job at the New Republic Magazine with a resume that reported a 4.0 GPA at Harvard, authorship of six books, proficiency in four languages including classical Armenian and Old Persian, and a string of prizes and awards. As reported in the book “Conning Harvard” by Julie Zuzmer, just one part of his resume was true. He did go to Harvard. But he got into Harvard by fabricating transcripts and placement exam scores.

I believe that the deepest sensibilities of this society are being challenged when educational institutions fabricate; and students are willing to cheat, and others commit fraud to join that institution.

The rot in the educational system is bad. And it is pervasive in our society. If universities do it and students do it, let’s face it; it is likely many of us cheat. In fact, studies show that our sense of our own morality is not about absolute lines drawn between honesty and dishonesty. Rather our sense of morality may be connected with the amount of cheating we feel comfortable with. Essentially people cheat up to the level that allows them to retain a self-image as reasonably honest individuals. (Ariely p. 23)

We all want to view ourselves as honest, honorable people. We want to be able to look at ourselves in the mirror and feel good about ourselves. On the other hand, many want to benefit from cheating and get as much success (money) as possible.

Here’s what Howard Gardner, professor at Harvard learned. He interviewed students about cheating. “Over and over again students told us that they admired good work and wanted to be good workers but they also told us they wanted – ardently – to be successful. They feared that their peers were cutting corners and if they themselves behaved ethically they would be bested.” To paraphrase Gardner: there is hollowness at the core. These are classic examples of the ends justifying the means.

David Abramowitz reminds me that when our children get a new video game the first thing they do is to find out the hidden codes so that they can take a shortcut and master the video game quickly. They don't play to enjoy, they play to win, even if it means cheating just a little.

And, thanks to Michael Lewis in his 2011 book "Boomerang," I was able to understand that the current economic crisis that started in Iceland, Ireland, and Greece, and the economic meltdown in the US in 2008 and 2009 was largely attributable to a collection of many separate instances of cheating. People cheating on their income taxes, government officials misreporting data, real estate lenders sidestepping rules, companies falsifying records – all of this resulted in the world economy collapsing under the weight of deception.

We hear of doctors who pad their bill for services to bilk the insurance system. After all, the insurance companies cut their reimbursements so the doctors have to cheat a little to earn more. We hear of researchers who are selective with the facts they consider in order to support a desired result.

When Harvard students were interviewed about the firing of a Dean after the discovery that she had misstated facts on her resume the students were opposed to the firing. They excused the misrepresentations by saying "everyone lies on their resume," and "she was doing a good job." What Gardner's research teaches us that even if we don't cheat, we are likely to enable cheating by excusing it in others.

Politicians make false claims and empty promises because we as a society will excuse them. Why do we excuse politicians in their lying and cheating? We excuse the lying because we are attached to an ideology; or we excuse the lying because we don't expect

any better from politicians; or we excuse the lying because we would do it ourselves in order to achieve success.

We sometimes tolerate cheating in sports. Tour de France winner Lance Armstrong **may** have been using illegal drugs and was discredited this year. I was quick to excuse him because he had accomplished much and given to charity. But I was wrong to offer excuses for what might have been illegal behavior. Cheating in sports is never acceptable. Sadly, this is a race to the bottom not a race to the top.

The problem I am most concerned about is that we excuse cheating. It makes us morally complicit. So why do we excuse cheating? Because we understand the desire to be successful; because over all we believe that professionals or financiers or governments are doing a good enough job; and because we don't expect better from ourselves; and because on some small levels many of us are doing the same.

Dan Ariely in his recent book The Honest Truth About Dishonesty describes how he constructed a simple test that really explains how we cheat. In his work, he created a math test of five questions. After sampling a large defined population, he determined that university students would get 3 of 5 questions wrong on average. He then administered the test to a group of students and put a shredder at the door to the room. When each student had finished the test he was to shred the test and report to a proctor his or her score on the test. And what do you think the average score was for those students who were reporting their own scores and destroying the test before anyone saw it? It was 4 out of 5. Not 5 out of 5, 4 out of 5. This demonstrates that we cheat to a certain level of comfort.

In another experiment Ariely discovered that more students would copy someone's seemingly dishonest behavior during an exam when that person was wearing an elite

school sweatshirt, like Carnegie Mellon. Ariely's conclusion? People are more likely to replicate dishonesty if it comes from a group with which they want to identify. Thus, the problem of cheating at Harvard is not local to Cambridge, Massachusetts. As a nation we look to Harvard for leadership. And let's remember that many of our political leaders attended Harvard.

But the most fascinating report in the Ariely book was about how to diminish cheating. In one experiment, the proctor for the exam read the Ten Commandments out loud and then administered the test. The results? You guessed it, those self reporting after hearing the Ten Commandments answered an average of 3 questions right. No cheating. Recalling moral standards improves moral behavior. (40)

If you believe that honesty is an important value, then awareness of morality and moral codes has an effect on our behavior.

A man goes to see the rabbi and says: "Rabbi, on Shabbos, someone stole my bicycle from the synagogue parking lot." The Rabbi says, "I have an idea of how to identify the thief. Next week in the torah reading we recite the Ten Commandments. During the reading, look at the members of the congregation. When we get to "thou shall not steal" notice who is trying to avoid looking you in the eye and I'll bet that is your thief." The congregant is pleased with the suggestion. Next Shabbos, the Ten Commandments are read. After services, the rabbi is curious to know if the plan worked. At the Kiddush he asks "so, did it work?" "Like a charm" the man says. "The moment we got to 'thou shalt not commit adultery' I remembered where I left my bike."

Awareness of morality and moral codes should have an effect on our behavior. Judaism, our religion, offers one set of moral codes and ritual practices that works to counteract the moral and ethical rot at the core of our society. In the Talmud at Menachot 44a, a great

lesson was taught: by R. Nathan about how we need reminders to keep us on a moral path if not a path of holiness.

Go and learn this from the precept of *tzitzit* (fringes). Once a man, who was very scrupulous about the precept of *tzitzit*, heard of a certain beautiful harlot in one of the towns by the sea who accepted four hundred gold [denars] for her hire. He sent her four hundred gold [denars] and appointed a day with her. When the day arrived he came and waited at her door, and her maid came and told her, 'That man who sent you four hundred gold [denars] is here and waiting at the door'; to which she replied 'Let him come in'. When he came in she prepared for him beds adorned with silver and gold. She then went up to the bed and lay down upon it naked.

He too went up after her in his desire to sit naked with her, when all of a sudden the four fringes [of his garment] struck him across the face; whereupon he slipped off and sat upon the ground. She also slipped off and sat upon the ground and said, 'By the Roman Capitol, I will not leave you alone until you tell me what blemish you saw in me.

'By the Temple', he replied, 'never have I seen a woman as beautiful as you are; but there is one precept which the Lord our God has commanded us, it is called *tzitzit*. Now [the *tzitzit*] appeared to me as four witnesses [testifying against me]'. This story tells us that a spiritual practice can keep us from immoral behavior. In fact, the story ends with the harlot being so taken with what she has witnessed, she gives away much of her wealth and goes to study with Rabbi Hiyya. The power of one person's act of holiness is that it may also affect others who are witness to that holiness.

To review: the Al Chet offers us a list of offenses. We are offered ten opportunities to review the list and do teshuvah. But even ten repetitions is not enough time. If we really consider the process of teshuvah, we may find that the greatest challenge is not that we do

any one of them, but that we justify depravity, we measure out immoralities, we defend missteps, we excuse blunders and we validate them. So what if educators fudge their data a little? So what if our leaders lie a little? So what if we cheat a little? We expect no better of our leadership perhaps because we expect no better of ourselves. In this process, we lose our own integrity and diminish holiness in this world.

A world that excuses lying and cheating is a world where the essential fabric of society is being unraveled. As Michael Lewis teaches, under the weight of many small instances of cheating, world economies collapse. This kind of cheating is worshipping personal success and not God.

This culture of acceptance of cheating and lying diminishes us. Accepting cheating is moral negligence on our part. Each such offense is not just an instance of cheating an institution or cheating the government, it diminishes from us as a society. Cheating erodes our strength, our self-esteem, and our very foundation.

And yet Judaism, our faith, our God offer us an alternative. We can add to the holiness of this world. All we need to do is have some reminders that we aspire to a better world. As you heard already, perhaps it is hearing the Ten Commandments or perhaps it is wearing tsitsit. Here are some other suggestions. You may want to put a mezuzah on the door to your office to remind you that your workplace can also be holy. You might want to commit to a course of study of Jewish texts, which can be a reminder of holiness. You may want to add a daily prayer practice into your lives, either through meditation, yoga, or even attending services. Any of these can be antidotes to moral decay and ways to increase holiness.

We should expect better of our educational institutions, we should expect better of our political leaders BUT we should expect nothing of them unless we expect it of ourselves.

Find for yourselves the spiritual markers that will keep you honest and bolster your own integrity. And this is a collective endeavor – as Jews we may act as individuals but we are always mindful of our relationships. Each of us must be committed to making the world a holy place together.

As you recall your sins during the reading of the *al chet* know that the teshuvah that you do here today can have a global effect. May the year ahead bring a world that sees morality restored, compassion increase and holiness everywhere.