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## Confession Before the Day of Judgment

By Rabbi Dr. Shlomo Brody | September 7, 2023

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No one likes confronting mortality, whether their own or that of their loved ones. Yet death is a reality of life which shapes the contours of our existence. It's also one of the themes of the High Holidays when the Book of Life is opened before us. Contemplating "Who will live and who will die?" while reciting selichot and vidui is meant to be a motivation for repentance now and a preparation for the ultimate Day of Judgment.

Given the central role of mortality in the human condition, Jewish law developed many laws and customs that help us confront death and dying. One of them, known as the "last confession" (*vidui*), has somewhat disappeared in recent centuries. In this column, I'll briefly lay out the case for restoring this meaningful ritual.

The Talmudic sages teach, "One who became ill and tends toward death, they say to him: confess" (Shabbat 32a). The rationale for this ritual is readily apparent. Once a person dies, they cannot confess or make amends. This might be their last opportunity before their personal Day of Judgment.

Indeed, Rabbi Eliezer taught, "Repent one day before your death." His students asked him, "But how do you know when you will die?" To which he replied, "Indeed. Therefore, repent each day so you will live a repentant life" (Shabbat 153a). Given the frailty of life, we should always aspire to have our physical and spiritual affairs in order. This is

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The “last confession” is not meant to be a manipulative ritual trying to curry favor with God, as it were. Instead, it seeks to allow a person to genuinely repent for sins, correct wrongdoings, reconcile with loved ones and acquaintances, and ask for and grant forgiveness. It’s also an opportunity to proclaim faith in God and His justice after a lifetime of contemplation and experience. This moment can also be an opportunity to impart final blessings to loved ones and give advice about living a good life.

Despite the ritual’s meaningfulness, it is not always possible to implement. In some cases, a person does not have the physical ability to verbalize the prayer. In these cases, many scholars note that the person should articulate these thoughts in their heart, with some suggesting that family members recite the confession aloud. At other times, a dying person might be in a coma. Some scholars feel that there is no point in someone else reciting the prayer at this stage. Others, however, counter that we never truly know which patients might still be able to hear our prayers.

In light of these challenges, the natural suggestion is to “move up” the recitation of this last confession to a point when a person is critically ill with an unclear prognosis. This suggestion was already made by classic commentators who felt that it was essential for a person to confess when they are healthy enough to be clear-headed. A person can then recite the confession and proclamations of faith along with holding heart-to-heart conversations. Should they live longer and have another opportunity to confess, they can certainly recite the vidui a second time. After all, as Rabbi Eliezer taught, there’s no quota on meaningful confessions. Indeed, Rabbi Hershel Schachter of Yeshiva University told me that his own father, Rabbi Melech Schachter, zt”l, recited this vidui nearly a dozen times, and he merited to live to the age of 94!

A bigger barrier to this ritual is psychological. It’s difficult for people to face the probability of their upcoming death. For this reason, the traditional vidui includes a prayer for recovery. Here’s the formulation of the standard version: “I acknowledge before You, Lord my God and the God of my ancestors, that my recovery and my death are in Your hands. May it be Your will to send me a complete recovery. Yet if I die, may my death be an atonement for all the errors, iniquities and willful sins that I have erred, sinned and transgressed before You.”

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a soft language, such as: “Many have confessed and not died, and many did not confess and died. As a reward for your confession, may you live. All who confess have a share in the world to come.” In some communities, the communal bikur cholim society created a uniform practice to suggest confession on the third day of the acute illness. This might prevent the person from fearing that the visit was made because they are about to die. Yet such a “standardized” schedule becomes difficult in contemporary societies in which modern medicine can keep a person alive for an extended period. Many have suggested that the emotional difficulty to talk about death as well as the extended and uncertain prognosis have caused this ritual to become somewhat sidelined.

Yet as Rabbis Shimon Glick and Alan Jotkowitz have argued, modern societies are more open about speaking about death and dying. Today’s doctors are largely inclined not to withhold any information regarding a patient’s diagnosis and prognosis. Patients are aware of the acute nature of their illness. Therefore, to withhold discussing the “last confession” is to deny them a critical tool for their spiritual preparations for death. Moreover, some patients may find solace from the ability to confess and repent while finding meaning from an opportunity for reconciliation. Jewish ritual has provided an important spiritual and emotional tool for the critically ill patient. Why should we deny it to them?

Ultimately, rituals like the “last confession” will only get revitalized when we dedicate efforts to reviving Jewish rituals that help us talk about death and dying. There’s no better time than the High Holidays to think about these questions. For if not now, when?

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