

Yom Kippur Day 5779 Pour Out My Shame

A great deal of the spiritual work of Yom Kippur is done aloud and in the plural. We gather together for Kol Nidrei to bear witness to each others' letting go of the promises that should no longer bind us; we rise together to beat our chests and seek forgiveness for sins that we ourselves may not even have performed; and as we look forward to the final services of today - which will come! - we can perhaps already envisage what it will be like to strive towards the final moments of the fast together, enfolded in community.

But Yom Kippur is also punctuated by silences. And it is in one of those periods of silence - one which repeats five times over the course of the day - that we find a central prayer for Yom Kippur; one which contains a profound message about what we seek from this holy day and what we aspire to achieve.

The prayer is attributed to Rava, a Babylonian rabbi. He was the head of the yeshiva in Mahoza, in Babylonia. He probably lived between around the years 280 and 355. We know about the prayer because it is quoted in the Talmud [Berakhot 17a] as an example of a private petition at the end of the Amidah. Over the centuries it has made its way into just about every Mahzor for Yom Kippur. It is only ever included in the liturgy for today, and only ever as silent, private prayer.

We will see that there may be good reasons for that.

This is what the prayer says: I have retranslated it slightly:

My God, before I was created I was worthless; and now that I have been created, it might just as well be that I was not. I am dust in my life; how much more so will I be dust when I die. Here I am before you like a vessel full of shame and humiliation. May it be your will, Lord my God and my ancestors' God, that I sin no more; and as for the sins I have already committed, empty me out in your abundant compassion - but not by way of pain and suffering.

[You can also find it on page 221]

Let me remind us again that this is specifically a prayer for Yom Kippur, and it is silent, and it is personal - so personal that we read it as ourselves, in the first person. Why? What is so special about it that it becomes a once-a-year experience?

The first thing to notice about the prayer is how worthless the author feels - such a negligible lightweight that the world does not register the difference between their presence and their absence. As pointless and useless as dust even when they are alive - just like the dust they will be reduced to after their death. This is a person who feels they do not have the right to exist at all, because they are 'a vessel full of shame and humiliation.'

The shame is so pervasive that it needs two words in Hebrew - *bushah* and *klimah*, which I have translated as 'shame and humiliation.' *Bushah* is a heavy, dragging, muddled shame; *klimah* is the sort of agonizing shame that makes us feel so exposed that we wish we could just curl up and disappear. Together they drag us into what Carl Jung called 'the swampland of the soul.'

Here in Louisiana we know that swampland is something to be feared. We naturally shrink away from it. It represents something so unpleasant and dangerous that it could swallow us whole. We would rather do just about anything else than go there. The swampland of the soul is the same - we expend huge amounts of energy trying to distract ourselves from those feelings, fearing that they will surface when we least expect them. We might even feel that shame - and the flight from shame - rules our lives.

And if we understand Yom Kippur as a day on which we are supposed to be taking a trip into the swampland of the soul - well, it's going to make us very reluctant to come here in the first place and very uncomfortable for us when we are here. And we might well leave feeling that we didn't achieve anything except to get even more exhausted and filthy.

But here's the thing Rava's prayer comes to teach us. *Bushah* and *klimah* are not what Yom Kippur is supposed to be about. Yom Kippur is about guilt. And guilt and shame are not the same thing.

The therapist and researcher Brene Brown draws a clear distinction between guilt and shame. She writes:

Shame is a focus on self, guilt is a focus on behavior. Shame is "I am bad." Guilt is "I did something bad." Guilt says: I'm sorry. I made a mistake. Shame says: I'm sorry. I am a mistake.

So guilt is about something we did, but shame is about something we are.

Guilt happens when we fail our own high expectations of ourselves. Every sin we list in the *Ashamnu* and the *Al Het* represents a failure of this kind - intentionally or unintentionally, with our bodies, with our minds, with our souls, we miss the mark over and over again and as we sense the space between the ideal of who we should be and the fact of who we are, we feel pain. And perhaps that's why, in the oldest system of our people, there was an *asham*, a guilt-sacrifice, that a person could bring to the Temple. It concretized that wish somehow to put something into the gap between the fact and the ideal. And once the sacrifice was made it became possible to move forward.

But shame, *bushah* and *kelimah*, are about believing that we are intrinsically bad, irredeemably flawed. And if we believe that, no Yom Kippur can help us. Every confession, every sin we enumerate, will simply hammer home the message of our own inadequacy.

So part of the work of today has to be to displace our shame so that we can work constructively with our guilt. But shame runs so deep and is so pervasive that it can feel impossible to shift.

And this is the genius of the second part of Rava's prayer. He prays:

May it be your will, Lord my God and my ancestors' God, that I sin no more; and as for the sins I have already committed, empty me out in your abundant compassion.

It's an interesting and rare thing the author is requesting. Generally in the prayers on Yom Kippur we ask for our sins to be forgiven (*s'lah lanu*), or pardoned (*m'hal lanu*) or atoned for (*Kapper lanu*).

All of those are essentially images of our wrongdoings being covered over. Sometimes the language varies - we ask for wrongdoing to be erased (*mahak*) or moved away (*veha'avir*). All of these expressions suggest moving something from where it is seen to where it becomes unseen. But even though there is such a wide choice of vocabulary available, the author chooses a word of his own - one that I believe does not appear in any other prayer on this day and which perhaps is the key to why it was chosen.

The author prays *Marek* - make me empty, empty me out. The image is of an external force changing our position, perhaps even turning us right upside down, so that the shame that has been trapped inside us can finally pour out, so that we are left empty.

And we ask to be emptied out mercifully - *berachamecha harabim*. We need to be handled gently, because shame hurts. We need this emptying to be done with great compassion and in a way that minimizes damage or pain.

If there is something stronger and wiser and kinder than us that can help us pour out our shame, we can finally begin to engage with our own guilt and let Yom Kippur do its work on our vulnerable souls.

We can admit that we did wrong things but accept the possibility of change. We can honestly confess that we are imperfect and sincerely beg for forgiveness while still knowing that we deserve to live a life of joy and fulfillment and awe, a life in which we know that we can begin again.

This is the power of Rava's prayer. And this is why we find it where it is in the Mahzor - at the end of the Amidah, within silence, deeply personal and intimate and before we come back together as a community.

And we, too, pray:

In the silences of today let us feel our shame being poured out.
In the empty place that follows, let us ask pardon for our guilt.
And as we move through this day together, may we feel whole once more.

Tzom kal - may we fast meaningfully and well.