



TEXT: CONFESSION LITURGY FROM YOM KIPPUR, THE DAY OF ATONEMENT

אֲשָׁמְנוּ, בָּגַדְנוּ, גָּזַלְנוּ, דִּבַּרְנוּ דָּפִי, הֶעָוִינוּ, וְהִרְשָׁעְנוּ, זָדְנוּ, חָמְסְנוּ, טָפְלְנוּ,
שָׁקַר, יַעֲצָנוּ רָע, כִּזְבְּנוּ, לָצְנוּ, מָרַדְנוּ, נֹאֲצָנוּ, סָרַרְנוּ, עָוִינוּ, פָּשַׁעְנוּ, צָרַרְנוּ,
קִשִּׁינוּ עֵרָף, רִשָּׁעְנוּ, שַׁחַתְנוּ, תַּעֲבָנוּ, תַּעֲיִנוּ, תַּעֲתָעְנוּ.

Ashamnu— we have trespassed; **Bagadnu**— we have dealt treacherously; **Gazalnu**— we have robbed; **Dibarnu dofi**— we have spoken slander; **He'evinu**—we have acted perversely; **V'hirshanu**— we have done wrong; **Zadnu**— we have acted presumptuously; **Hamasnu**— we have done violence; **Tafalnu sheker**— we have practiced deceit; **Yaatsnu ra**— we have counseled evil; **Kizavnu**— we have spoken falsehood; **Latsnu**— we have scoffed; **Maradnu**— we have revolted; **Niatsnu**— we have blasphemed; **Sararnu**— we have rebelled; **Avinu**— we have committed iniquity; **Pashanu**— we have transgressed; **Tsararnu**— we have oppressed; **Kishinu oref**— we have been stiff necked; **Rashanu**— we have acted wickedly; **Shichatnu**— we have dealt corruptly; **Tiavnu**— we have committed abomination; **Tainu**— we have gone astray; **Titanu**— we have led others astray.

– Siddur and Yom Kippur Liturgy



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EXPLANATION OF TEXT:

The Ashamnu prayer is part of the daily ritual of the traditional Jew, appearing as a silently-said part of the morning service.

It is more familiar to many Jews as a prayer said on the High Holy Days and most especially notably on Yom Kippur. In that context it is said loudly and demonstratively as part of the general confession of sins which all Jews are required to say. As a prayer it is known from the 8th century although some of its roots are biblical and can be seen as part of the prayer of Daniel in the ninth chapter of the book that bears his name.

The reason it is brought here is that it forms a classic example of a tendency that is very central in Jewish prayer, namely, the fact that so much of it is said in the plural form rather than in the singular. Prayer in theory might perhaps be expected to be predominantly in the singular since it is supposed to be an expression of a personal relationship with God.

When one prays, the assumption is that you are talking personally to God – or at least trying to make some kind of a personal connection. But in Judaism more often than not it is the plural forms that are used when addressing God. It is as if the collective rather than the individual expresses itself in prayer through the mouth of the individual, or perhaps more accurately, prayer happens when the individual submerges her or himself in the collective.

The roots of this ideology are in the Tanach, the Hebrew Bible, but the Rabbis, who were the people who, more than any other group, developed the prayer service and Jewish liturgy as whole, extended and deepened the idea.

The Ashamnu prayer is a superb example of the practice, because it is a confession of sin. What could be more personal than a confession of this nature? The whole idea of a confession can be expressed as the need of the individual to confess his or her own sins.

But in the “Ashamnu” we don’t express our own sins, or if we do, it is done within the framework of a communal confession in which the individual Jew takes responsibility for the sins of the collective, whether or not they are things which the individual feels that he or she has done themself.

Why on earth would an individual confess sins which he or she has not performed? – because of the idea that communal responsibility, responsibility for the collective, rests with the individual. The Biblical idea that God judges the collective, seeing the collective as an entity which either does right or does wrong and calling down reward or punishment on the collective according to the behavior of the individuals inside it, is here affirmed.

In the previous text we saw how the individual is expected to take responsibility for the collective: here we see that the collective will be judged by the deeds of its individuals and the whole collective will carry the responsibility and will be rewarded or punished accordingly.

Thus, from a theological point of view, the whole community will rise or fall together, held accountable for the actions of its constituent members. In the traditional Jewish outlook, the fate of the individual is inextricably tied up with the fate of the collective of which he or she is a part.

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EDUCATIONAL SUGGESTIONS:

Here are three suggestions for using this piece:

1. Introduce the group to the piece? Do they know it? Where is it from? When is it said? Ask every individual to choose the “sins” that they think are applicable to them from this list. Concentrating on Rosh HaShana and Yom Kippur, do they think that it is reasonable to confess “their sins” (i.e. the relevant ones for them)? Why? Why not? Now discuss the ones that they don’t think that they have done? Ask why we are asked to confess sins that we ourselves have not done? What logic can there be in such a “meaningless” confession? After presenting the collective logic behind the idea, discuss how they feel being saddled with everyone else’s sins? What do they think about the idea of collective responsibility for the Jewish People which stands behind the ashamnu? Solutions?
2. Ask what the purpose of prayer is for Jews? Who is it for? Is it for the individual’s spiritual connection with something greater or are there other reasons behind it? Present the ashamnu confession/prayer. Divide the group into small groups and let each one modernize the ashamnu to make it relevant for Jews today. Should it be changed? If so, how?
3. Let the groups present their finished product to the whole group and use that to lead into a discussion on the question of collective or individual responsibility. Present the idea of the minyan – the group without which many of the most special and important parts of the Jewish prayer cannot take place. Why do others have to be present when a person participates in those special moments of prayer? How do they react to the communal aspects of prayer?