



## The Risk of Relationality Or: Why Confession Matters

Rabbi Shai Held

Three verses in parashat Naso that appear at first glance to be limited in scope to a specific transgression and its consequences turn out to have momentous implications for Jewish spirituality and ethics. They teach us just how much hinges on the power of speech.<sup>1</sup>



The book of Leviticus details what happens when one Israelite defrauds or steals from another, and then takes a false oath declaring his innocence. In order to make restitution, he must first return what he took and pay an additional fine of twenty percent to the aggrieved party. Then he must bring a guilt offering, which the priest offers up for him. When all that has been done, Leviticus teaches, “he shall be forgiven for whatever he may have done to draw blame thereby” (Leviticus 5:20-26).

Parashat Naso reiterates the law but also subtly adds to it in two ways:

***Why must the sacrifice be supplemented—and preceded—by confession?***

When a man or woman commits  
any wrong toward a fellow man,  
thus breaking faith with the Lord,

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. what I have written about the power—and the danger—of words in “Life-Giving, Death-Dealing Words,” CJLI Parashat Metzora 5774, available [here](#).



and that person realizes his guilt (*ve-ashmah ha-nefesh ha-hi*), he shall confess (*ve-hitvadu*) the wrong that he has done. He shall make restitution in the principal amount and add one-fifth to it, giving it to him whom he has wronged. If the man has no kinsman to whom restitution can be made, the amount repaid shall go to the Lord for the priest—in addition to the ram of expiation with which expiation is made on his behalf (Numbers 5:6-8).

First, we learn how to handle an unusual situation: If the one who has been cheated dies leaving no relatives, the restitution goes to the priests. Second, and crucially, we are told of an additional requirement: “The reparation must be preceded by confession.”<sup>2</sup>

Our verses mention sacrifice almost as an afterthought; they seem much more concerned with the culprit’s confession than with the offering he brings. Why must the sacrifice be supplemented—and preceded—by confession? Perhaps the Torah worries that people will confuse sacrifice for magic and assume that it works automatically: If I go astray, I can simply bring a sacrifice and presume that all has been forgotten. But repentance requires much more: The requirement of confession makes clear that the sinner “must humble himself, acknowledge his wrong, and resolve to depart from sin.”<sup>3</sup>

Bible scholar Jacob Milgrom argues that the Torah departs from the common assumptions of the ancient Near East precisely in insisting that “rituals [are] not inherently efficacious.” This

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<sup>2</sup> Jacob Milgrom, *Numbers* (2003), p. 34.

<sup>3</sup> Jacob Milgrom, “Repentance in the OT,” in *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible—Supplementary Volume* (1976), pp. 736-738; passage cited is on p. 737.

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pivotal point is “underscored by the sacrificial formula of forgiveness: The required ritual is carried out by the priest, but its desired end, forgiveness, is granted solely by God.” To take an example from Leviticus, “the priest shall make expiation on [the sinning chieftain’s] behalf, and he shall be forgiven [by God]” (Leviticus 4:26).<sup>4</sup>

But can’t confession, too, be reduced to rote?

Instead of mechanically offering up an animal,

I mindlessly mutter a few words and go home.

*But can’t confession, too, be reduced  
to rote?*

At first glance, at least, the obligation to confess relocates the problem of insincerity but does not solve it.

Our verses tell us what comes before confession: *Ve-ashmah ha-nefesh ha-hi*, which JPS (cited above) renders as “that person realizes his guilt.” This translation makes it sound like the sinner has made a cognitive discovery of his own misdeeds. But Milgrom argues that when the root *a-s-m* appears in the Torah without a direct object (as in our case), it “refers to an inner experience of... liability [to someone for reparation], i.e., ‘to feel guilt.’” Thus, our verses should more correctly be rendered as “when that person feels guilt, he shall confess...” When the sinner is assailed by “the self-punishment of conscience, the torment of guilt,” then—and presumably only then—should he confess and make reparation for the crime he has committed.<sup>5</sup> Mechanical confession, in other words, simply will not do.

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<sup>4</sup> Milgrom, “Repentance in the OT,” p. 736.

<sup>5</sup> Jacob Milgrom, *Cult and Conscience: The Asham and the Priestly Doctrine of Repentance* (1976), pp. 3,10,11.



If Milgrom is right, then the Torah is unambiguous about its demands of the repentant sinner: A sacrifice must be brought, but the sinner's "involvement, both in conscience and in deed, is a *sine qua non* for securing divine forgiveness."<sup>6</sup> Beyond the repayment and the fine, the one seeking to make amends must feel remorse, express it in words, and offer a sacrifice to God. Of course, whether or not to grant forgiveness remains God's exclusive prerogative.

***Why does speaking one's guilt—as opposed to merely feeling it—matter so much?***

Why does speaking one's guilt—as opposed to merely feeling it—matter so much? If genuine pangs of contrition are required, then why must they be verbalized?

Following the lead of parashat Naso, Maimonides (Rambam, 1135-1204) opens his presentation of the Laws of Repentance by invoking the need for verbal confession of sin. Appealing explicitly to our verses, he writes: "If a person transgresses any of the commandments of the Torah, whether an obligation or a prohibition, whether intentionally or inadvertently—when he repents and returns from his sin, he must confess before God, as [Scripture] says, 'When a man or woman commits any wrong toward a fellow man, thus breaking faith with the Lord, and that person feels guilty, he shall confess the wrong that he has done'—this refers to a verbal confession (*vidui devarim*). This confession is a positive commandment (*mitzvot aseh*)" (Mishneh Torah, Laws of Repentance, 1:1). Our question about Numbers, then, is really a question about the history of Jewish piety and spirituality more broadly: Why is confession, putting our guilt into words, so important?

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<sup>6</sup> Milgrom, "Repentance in the OT," p. 737.



R. Eliyahu Dessler (1892-1953) suggests that in attempting to change, “intellectual or emotional revelations are not enough. Rather, one must also express them in words, because when one adds speech to thoughts and feelings, they become firmly established in one’s heart. The spiritual level one attains through repentance is thus finally established and determined by speech.”<sup>7</sup> According to R. Dessler, then, confession is essential because of its unique power to affect the person doing the confessing. Words change us in a way that mere thoughts or feelings cannot. Putting our guilt into words enables us to change in deeper and more enduring ways than we otherwise would.

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Dessler may well be right: Expressing something in words can make it more real than merely thinking or feeling it. Yet I wonder whether something even more fundamental underlies Judaism’s commitment to verbal confession: Whereas thoughts and feelings are private and internal, words are (potentially, at least) relational. Let’s begin with a human case. When I regret having treated someone poorly, my regret is, at first, purely internal: It is about me and my relationship to my own character and actions. It is only when I express my regret—when I apologize—that I create a relational space between me and the person I have wronged. Apologies break through my self-enclosure and create a bridge between me and the other person. To ask another person for forgiveness is, in other words, a relational gesture, a posture of genuine opening.

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<sup>7</sup> R. Eliyahu Dessler, *Mikhtav Me-Eliyahu*, vol. 5, p. 260.



*It is so much easier to regret my actions  
in the privacy of my own inner world.*

Apologizing requires us to make ourselves  
vulnerable. It is thus not surprising that  
*saying* sorry is often so much harder than

merely *feeling* sorry. We may acknowledge what we have done, beg for forgiveness, and... be rebuffed. Apologizing also demands humility: I have to recognize my shortcomings and resist the temptation to make excuses. It is so much easier to regret my actions in the privacy of my own inner world—which is precisely why Judaism asks that I express remorse for them verbally, in the interpersonal sphere.<sup>8</sup>

Something similar is at stake in confessing sins before God. It is one thing to regret my sins; it is quite another to implore, “Please, God—I have sinned, transgressed, and acted rebelliously before you and have done such and such. Behold, I feel regret and shame over my actions, and I will never do this again” (Mishneh Torah, Laws of Repentance 1:1). It is only when I speak words—when I confess my sins—that I open a relational space between me and God. Maimonides insists that this act of opening lies at the very heart of the process of repentance.

In a related vein, R. Elimelekh Bar Shaul (1913-1964) argues that we should distinguish between repentance from sin (*teshuvah min ha-heit*), on the one hand, and return to God (*teshuvah el Hashem*), on the other. The first, he insists, is largely a process that takes place between a person and her conscience. “Once a person recognizes the gravity of her sin, she engages in difficult internal work in order to free herself from it. She abandons the sin in the

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<sup>8</sup> The same dynamic often plays itself out in the realm of interpersonal love as well. The gap between feeling love for someone and telling them is one many people find almost to impossible to close. Humility and vulnerability taken in tandem can be exhilarating, but they can also be terrifying. Authentic human connectedness depends on a willingness to risk expressing feelings that otherwise remain locked in our own private universes.



present and utterly commits not to return to it in the future. With this concludes the process of internal repentance, repentance from sin.” But this process, R. Bar Shaul is quick to point out, is “purely psychological” and need not have any connection at all to God or to Torah. The repentance Judaism is concerned with, however, “demands not just repentance from sin but also return to God. Sin is not bad merely because it does moral damage, but also and primarily because it creates distance between a person and her God... And this is the greatest crisis a person can face—to be distant from God.”<sup>9</sup> To borrow Bar Shaul’s terms, what I am suggesting is that internal regret may be useful in repenting from sin, but it does not facilitate return to God. For that we need confession, the risk of relationally reaching out to and for God.

Along similar lines, people often wonder why we are asked to speak words in Jewish prayer. If God knows the secrets of my heart,

*Speaking is the bridge leading out of my otherwise self-enclosed universe.*

why do I have to ask God for what I want, or express my praise or gratitude (or protest) in words? The answer, I think, is that prayer is not about informing God of something God does not yet know. It is, rather, about inviting God in, of allowing words to create the possibility of real relationship with God. Speaking is the bridge leading out of my otherwise self-enclosed universe.

Martin Buber (1878-1965) distinguishes powerfully between what he calls “experience,” on the one hand, and what he labels “encounter,” on the other. When I experience someone, I

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<sup>9</sup> R. Elimelech Bar Shaul, *Mitzvah Va-Lev*, vol. 1 (1967), pp. 133-134.



am concerned primarily—or even exclusively—with how they affect me; my interest in them is not in any deep sense *about them*. When I encounter someone, in contrast, there is a genuine meeting between me and them, and it is with them in all their fullness that I interact. Experience, for Buber, is stubbornly non-relational: “Those who experience do not participate in the world. For the experience is ‘in them’ and not between them and the world.”<sup>10</sup> But encounter is dialogical; it is about genuine openness to the other. What matters most is not what happens *in me* but *between us*. To put this another way: Most of the time we fail to create ample space for the other.<sup>11</sup> All too often in human interactions, tragically, there is only me and the way you make me feel. With the language of encounter Buber offers an invitation to another way of being, to moments where there is an I and there is a you, and genuine reciprocity and mutuality emerge between us. What I have been suggesting is that Judaism’s insistence on voicing our regret is an attempt to open a door to genuine encounter, with God and with others.

I have written elsewhere about the Torah’s call to integrate emotion and action, our inner lives and our concrete deeds.<sup>12</sup> In an understated but immensely powerful way, parashat Naso provides a paradigm for just this aspiration: Confession without contrition is empty; contrition without confession is solipsistic. When we seek to change our ways, the Torah

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<sup>10</sup> Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (1923), trans. Walter Kaufmann (1970). p. 56.

<sup>11</sup> On the idea of making space for others, in Buber’s thought and more broadly, cf. what I have written in “Being Present While Making Space, Or: Two Meanings of Tzimtzum,” CJLI Parashat Terumah 5774, available [here](#).

<sup>12</sup> Cf, for some examples, “The Importance of Character, Or: Why Stubbornness is Worse Than Idolatry,” CJLI Parashat Ki Tissa 5774, available [here](#); “Loving Our Neighbor: A Call to Emotion and Action,” CJLI Parashat Kedoshim 5774, available [here](#); “Coveting, Craving... and Being Free,” CJLI Parashat Va-Ethanan 5774, available [here](#); and “The Beginning and End of Torah,” CJLI Parashat Ve-Zot Ha-Berakhah 5774, available [here](#).



teaches, we must feel remorse, express it, and act to heal the breaches we have caused—with God through sacrifice and with the person we have mistreated through restitution.

Shabbat Shalom.

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