



Facing the Truth: The First Step to Confessing in Prayer

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How are we meant to admit sin in our prayers? What is the model for confession after having done something wrong?

In Parashat Mikeitz, the brothers finally admit to themselves that they are guilty of wronging Yosef. Years earlier, the brothers had thrown Yosef into a pit and then sold him as a slave. But now we get more information about that story. The brothers say:

Genesis 42:21

בראשית מב:כא

...We saw the distress of his soul when he begged us,
but we didn't listen...

...רָאִינוּ צָרַת נַפְשׁוֹ בְּהִתְחַנְּנוֹ אֵלֵינוּ וְלֹא
שָׁמְעֵנוּ...

Apparently, Yosef wasn't a silent sufferer when thrown into the pit; he begged his brothers to save him. This *midrash* expands on this scene:¹

¹ This is a tradition that has roots in the Second Temple-era book Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs, Testament of Zevulun 2:1-3; see ed. James Kugel, *Outside the Bible* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2013), vol. 2, p. 1779-80. See also Ramban to Genesis 42:21.



Bereishit Rabbah 91:8, ed. Theodor-Albeck, p. 1130

R. Levi said in the name of R. Yohanan bar She'ila: Is it possible that Yosef was 17 years old, saw that his brothers were selling him [into slavery] and was silent?! Rather, this teaches that Yosef threw himself at the feet of each [of the brothers] so that they would be filled with mercy for him, but they weren't filled [with mercy].

בראשית רבה (תיאודור-אלבק) צא:ח

עמוד 1130

רבי לוי בשם רבי יוחנן בר שאילה אפשר
יוסף בן שבע עשרה שנה היה רואה את
אחיו מוכרים אותו והוא שותק, אלא מלמד
שהיה מתחבט לפני רגליו של כל אחד
ואחד כדי שיתמלאו עליו רחמים ולא
נתמלאו.

Yosef did not go silently into slavery, but the brothers simply ignored Yosef's begging. Some midrashim even describe the brothers actively walking away from Yosef as he screamed and cried.²

The brothers sinned by selling Yosef into slavery (a capital crime according to Exodus 21:16). But that is not the part that haunts them years later. When they admit their guilt, they focus on the fact that they ignored Yosef's crying and begging, and that is the real sin.³

The brothers admit guilt in this moment quite succinctly:

² Sefer Ha-Yashar to Genesis 37:23 (repr. Jerusalem, 1987), p. 67b. See also Torah Sheleimah to Genesis 37:23, vol 7, p. 1419, note 142.

³ See Netziv on Genesis 42:21: "אבל האכזריות של" - The sale of Yosef was not the sin, although it was fitting to be, but rather the meanness of the hardening of the heart from Yosef's begging—that was considered the sin." Indeed, if the sale was the main sin, Reuven would have been exempt, as he was not present for the sale! But he is complicit in ignoring Yosef's cries. See Or Ha-Hayyim on this same verse. Contrast this with God's listening to the cries of the poor and vulnerable in Exodus 22:22, 26.



Genesis 42:21**בראשית מב:כא**

Aval guilty are we concerning our brother that we saw the distress of his soul when he begged us, but we didn't listen...

אָבֵל אֲשֶׁמִּים אָנַחְנוּ עַל־אָחֵינוּ אֲשֶׁר
רָאִינוּ צָרַת נַפְשׁוֹ בְּהִתְחַנְנוּ אֵלֵינוּ וְלֹא
שָׁמַעְנוּ

What is the meaning of *aval*? Normally, we translate this word as “however” or “but.” In the Torah, though, the word only comes twice, and means something slightly different: “in truth.”⁴ This is a moment of facing the truth for the brothers. They finally admit, after ignoring their actions for years, that they have done something wrong. R. Samson Raphael Hirsch sums up this moment:

R. Samson Raphael Hirsch to Genesis 42:21

It is not possible to cover the voice of the conscience. One can cover coals with dirt, but after 50 years, the fire can still ignite from it. “In truth!” (*Aval!*) All our justifications were lies and trickery.

Facing the truth—no matter how deep we have buried it—is the first step to confession. So often we ignore the truth and never move to the stage of recognition or confession.

How is the brothers’ admission a model for our prayer life? R. Yehudah He-Hasid (12th c.) in Sefer Hasidim, notes this scene as the archetype of our admission of sin in regular prayer:

⁴ The only other place it appears is Genesis 17:19; see Rashi and Targum Onkelos on that verse (although compare Targum Neofiti). See also Israel Eitan, “Hebrew and Semitic Particles,” *The American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures* 45 (1929), pp. 206-207 and Yosef Segel, “*Aval*,” *Sinai* 64 (1968), pp. 95-96. The word אָבֵל means “in truth” in some places in rabbinic literature as well. See, for example, Talmud Bavli Eruvin 30b and Niddah 3b. Later tradition knows of a translation that means “however,” see Bereishit Rabbah 91:8, ed. Theodor-Albeck, p. 1130, which equates אָבֵל with בְּרָם = however.



Sefer Hasidim #41, ed. Wistinetzki, p. 40

One should pray with a broken heart about one's sins, and mention their transgressions, as it says, "In truth, guilty are we."

ספר חסידים דפוס ברלין סימן מא

ויתפלל בלב נשבר על חטאיו ויזכור עונותיו שנאמר (בראשית מב:כא) "אבל אשמים אנחנו"

This is not just a recommendation for general prayer, however. The brothers' statement serves as the basis of the core confession of our liturgy on Yom Kippur. In the Talmud, Bar Hamdudi reports the following about his teacher Shmuel:

Talmud Bavli Yoma 87b

As Bar Hamdudi said: I was standing before Shmuel [on Yom Kippur], and he was seated. When the prayer leader arrived at the phrase "In truth we have sinned," Shmuel stood up. [Bar Hamdudi] said, "Therefore, this is the essence of confession."

תלמוד בבלי יומא פז:

דאמר בר המדודי: הוה קאימנא קמיה דשמואל, והוה יתיב, וכי מטא שליחא דצבורא ואמר אבל (אנחנו) חטאנו קם מיקם. אמר, שמע מינה: עיקר וידוי האי הוא.

Although we confess our sins in multiple forms on Yom Kippur, the core confession is three simple words: *aval anahnu hatanu*.⁵ The story of the brothers admitting guilt clearly serves as the biblical intertext to this confession.⁶

Yoma 87b	<i>Aval</i>	<i>Anahnu</i>	<i>Hatanu</i>
Genesis 42:21	<i>Aval</i>	<i>Ashemim</i>	<i>Anahnu</i>

The sin of Joseph's brothers is one of the core sins of the Jewish people recalled on Yom Kippur. In some midrashim and poems about the 10 rabbinic martyrs of the

⁵ Later this phrase developed to also include "*avoteinu* - our ancestors." See Daniel Goldschmidt, *Maḥzor Le-Yamim Nora'im* (Jerusalem: Koren, 1970), vol. 2, p. 11, n. 17.

⁶ See R"l bar Yakar, *Perush Ha-Tefillot Ve-Ha-Berakhot*, ed. Shmuel Yerushalmi (Jerusalem: Me'Orei Yisrael, 1979), vol. 2, p. 106. Abudraham follows this word for word; see *Abudraham Ha-Shalem*, p. 282.



second century, recalled in Musaf of Yom Kippur, the reason why the rabbis were killed in such violent manner was because the 10 brothers of Yosef were never punished for their sin.⁷

If Yosef's brothers are the model of admitting sin, what does confession mean?

Confession means dredging up sins long ago buried. Confession means beginning to take responsibility for one's actions. Confession means recognizing the ways in which people are pleading with us, but we refuse to listen to them. Ultimately, confession means recognizing the ugly truth, which we tend to ignore, and stating it out loud.⁸

Part of praying is facing the truth of who we are, owning that, and connecting to God around what we see in ourselves. When it comes to confession, the brothers serve as our behavioral and liturgical model. This is noted by Rabbeinu Behaye in his comments on our verse:⁹

R. Behaye to Gen 42:21, ed. Chavel, p. 341

ר' בחיי בראשית מב:כא

"In truth, guilty are we concerning our brother"— this is the way of the righteous, when they sin, they confess the matter and accept the consequences of their actions... but the way of the wicked, when they sin, is to say: that was not a sin.

אבל אשמים אנחנו על אחינו – זה דרך הצדיקים כשחוטאים מודים בדבר ומצדיקים עליהן את הדין, ... ודרך הרשעים שחוטאים ואומרים איננו חטא...

⁷ The description of their deaths appears in the piyyut Eleh Ezkerah in Daniel Goldschmidt, *Mahzor Le-Yamim Nora'im*, (Jerusalem: Koren, 1970), vol. 2, pp. 568-573. The *midrash* that serves as the basis for the poem appears in a number of forms, identified by Burton Visotzky, *Midrash Mishlei* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 2002 [repr.]), p. 18 and notes there; Adolph Jellenik, *Beit Ha-Midrash* (Vienna, 1873), vol. 2, pp. 64-72; vol. 6, pp. 19-30 and pp. 31-35. See also Bereishit Rabbah 84:16 (Munich manuscript, ed. Theodor-Albeck, p. 1020).

⁸ See further my essay "Aval Chatanu (But/In Truth We Have Sinned): A Literary Investigation," in *We Have Sinned: Sin and Confession in Judaism*, ed. Lawrence Hoffman (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 2012), pp. 181-185.

⁹ R. Behaye ben Asher, 1255-1340.



Ignoring the pleas of those crying before us, those whom we have wronged, is a core sin in our people's history. Indeed, it is our original collective sin.¹⁰ In our prayer life, we may seek to examine whom we have wronged, admit our sin, and work harder to listen to the cries of those we have harmed. Only then might we be able to move forward to a world of forgiveness and redemption.

¹⁰ The 10 sons of Jacob involved in putting Joseph into the pit are the very first people in the Torah called by the name of our people, "Children of Israel" (in Genesis 42:5). They are the original Israelites / Benei Yisrael, and their sin is our first as a people. My thanks to Jeremy Tabick for this point.

