

Deviant Normalcy: The Healing Power of Viddui: YK 5783

I married someone I didn't love because I wanted to wear the dress.

I trashed my parents' house to look like I had a party while they were out of town...so my Mom would think I have friends.

I smile sweetly and pretend to sympathize with my buddies who are always fighting with their mothers. I would give my left arm just to have my mother alive to fight with.

While these confessions are not my own, they are true outpourings of the human heart, messages written in response to one incredible invitation. In November of 2004, a small business owner named Frank Warren printed 3,000 postcards with the following words: "You are invited to anonymously contribute a secret to a community art project. Your secret can be a regret, fear, betrayal, desire, confession, or childhood humiliation. Reveal anything - as long as it is true and you have never shared it with anyone before. Be brief. Be legible. Be creative." Warren handed out postcards and left them in public places, and very quickly something strange began to happen. By 2005, he had received over 10,000 post-secrets - cards that he described as "graphic haikus" filled with the "extraordinary confessions of ordinary people." And the cards have continued to arrive daily:

On a hand drawn map of the United States, "Sometimes I want to run away from home. (I'm 38, married with a child.)"

On a black and white wedding photograph with the faces etched out, "I know he doesn't love me anymore."

Written in colorful letters, punctuated with an exclamation point: "I'm starting rabbinical school and I love bacon!" (I swear - that one wasn't mine!)

Some of Warren's secrets are funny, like the following scribbled onto a Starbucks coffee cup: "I give decaf to customers who are rude to me."

Some of his secrets are heartbreaking: "When I see an ugly bride what I am really seeing is a glimmer of hope for the future."

And some of the secrets are thought provoking: "I paid an 'F' student \$50 to write my valedictorian speech. And it was way better than mine could ever have been."

Such are the complexities and anguish held within the human heart.

We gather here this Yom Kippur, a community of secret keepers. Over the past twelve months each of us has accumulated a collection of joys and sorrows, successes and failures, regrets, humiliations, fears, hopes, prayers, and dreams that no one else can really know. For all that we share with our friends and loved ones, there are also those things that we keep most guardedly private. And, of course, there are also the secrets that we keep even from ourselves.

We also gather these sacred days to hear the stories of secret keepers, for indeed the heroes of our Torah and Haftarah readings each High Holiday season are characters who demonstrate the very kind of "deviant normalcy" that is at the heart of almost every Post Secret confession. For all that our protagonists display devotion to God and faith of the highest order, I don't believe that it was for this reason alone that their stories were selected for this time. Rather, I would suggest that the unsettling narratives of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur were intended to do just that, to unsettle, reminding us that human experience is often painful and messy, embarrassing and raw. In many ways, this very imperfection is what Kol Nidre night is all about.

Over the Days of Awe, we see characters make terrible decisions -Sarah offering her husband Hagar as a maidservant and later demanding that their child be expelled; Abraham preparing to sacrifice his beloved son; Jonah attempting to thwart God's plan and flee to Nineveh. We also see characters confronted with

unbearable situations - The barren Hannah whose prayers for a child are so desperate that she appears drunk; the heart-broken Aaron faced with the untimely death of his two sons; the terrified Ishmael sent to starve to death alone in the wilderness. Let us imagine for a moment the buried secrets of these important figures. Let us imagine their confessions.

"I have two incredible sons, but sometimes I think that I love one of them more than the other."

"Even though I gave him permission to do it, every time I see that woman and her child I wish they were dead."

"My father says he only put the knife to my throat to show the depth of his faith, but I'll never forgive him for putting God before he put me."

"Somehow the simple fact of not having a child makes me feel like I am nothing at all."

These readings remind us that human emotions can be both unique and universal at the same time -that as we stand here on Yom Kippur with our own deviantly normal secrets buried deep inside, we are not alone. Indeed, it is that holy joining of individual and community that brings many of us to synagogue here today.

We come to High Holiday services seeking a great many things. In part, we come to honor the year just ended and to make resolutions for the one yet barely underway. We come to see friends and connect with community, to feel part of something greater than ourselves and perhaps even to glimpse the Divine. We come out of tradition – to please our parents, to remember those no longer with us, to sit amongst treasured family members, to pass Judaism on to the next generation. We come because of Jewish pride and sometimes because of Jewish guilt, looking for hope, inspiration, forgiveness, new beginnings.

I also believe that we come to the High Holidays seeking salve for the wounds of everyday living, and one of the things that I have learned from Post Secret is that confession can be a powerful healer. Since 2004, Frank

Warren has received hundreds of thousands of postcards which he has turned into multiple books, a website and online community, an international art exhibit, a traveling lecture series and more. Clearly, there is something immensely compelling about sharing one's secrets - even if it is done anonymously and with complete strangers. Clearly, too, there is something immensely compelling about bearing witness to the secrets of others as evidenced by the thousands of devoted fans who read Warren's books and visit his website daily.

Viddui. The High Holidays are also about confession, as we recite the traditional words of the *Al Chet* and the *Ashamnu*, beating our breasts and recounting our sins. At *Tashlich* last week we released breadcrumbs into water, symbolically letting go of our missteps. During the *aseret y'mei teshuvah*, the ten days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur which culminate tonight, we are supposed to admit our mistakes to those whom we have wronged and ask for forgiveness. What if we were to change the lens slightly, however, to make these prayers and rituals less about admitting our mistakes and more about admitting our truths, less about repairing codes of etiquette and more about repairing our souls? *Teshuvah* - the return that we seek each High Holiday season - is not just about turning back from poor behavior but it is about turning back to our truest self, to the kind of people we most want to be in this world. To find that place, many of us first need to do a bit of healing.

While the etymology of the word *viddui* (confession) is not entirely clear, the term is most likely derived from the Hebrew root *yadah* - meaning to throw or cast away. And, indeed, this is what the High Holiday season offers us the opportunity to do - to unburden ourselves of the secrets kept inside, to release some of our brokenness and look towards creating a fresh and hopeful new start. I have, on more than one occasion, been asked why confession to God is even necessary given that the Omniscient certainly knows our mistakes and transgressions –is, as we say in the piyyut *L'eyl Orecha Din, goleh amukot* and *tzofeh nistarot* – the One

who reveals what is hidden in our hearts, Who discerns our deepest secrets. My answer has always been that confession is not for God but rather for *us*; it allows us the release that we so desperately need in order to change. Post Secret, *tashlich*, Catholic confession, AA, psychotherapy - all of these can "work" because they represent taking action, letting go of our demons and assimilating the painful parts of our past, conquering the hurts that can sometimes hold us back and looking to change - if not our reality than the hold that our reality has over us. We first let go with our mouths, confessing that which we wish to release, and we hope that our hearts and minds will soon follow. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why we beat our breast during the recitation of these prayers. We hope that the resolve of our lips will penetrate our deepest insides.

Of course, it is not just the simple act of release that makes confession so powerful - it is also knowing that we are not alone in our search for wholeness, that there are others who care about our struggles, support us in our healing, and labor alongside us for repair of their very own. Earlier this month on You-Tube I saw a video called "Automatic Confession" where an unwitting supplicant enters a confessional only to be told that he must announce his sin into an automated voice recorder. The confessor, guilty of adultery, is then told to use an electronic keypad to indicate the number of women with whom he has transgressed and instructed to wait while his penance prints out. In certain ways, automated confession should be no different than mailing an unsigned postcard or reciting a scripted list of "sins" in the midst of a crowded congregation - in both situations supplicants are anonymous, the particular secrets of their hearts unknown by those around him. The difference, of course, is that human beings are entirely different partners in confession than are machines. There is enormous strength and comfort that comes from the power of connection.

We know that prayer, in Jewish tradition, is a communal endeavor. We require a *minyan* of ten for the most sacred parts of our worship; we offer confession not privately to our clergy but communally to our God; we recite the words of the *Viddui* in the plural rather than in the singular. We recite these confessions

communally as a statement of principle - affirming that we share jointly in the ills of our world, that we all are to blame when society does not function as it should. We recite these confessions communally because it affords us some measure of privacy; it would be too humiliating to publicly admit our own specific failings and hurts. And, perhaps most importantly, we recite these confessions communally because we gain strength from the presence of others - their willingness to face their secrets giving us courage to do the same. In the words of my colleague, Rabbi Mark Greenspan, "*Ashamnu*" we say. "'We have sinned, we have sinned.' But in this simple word, not even present as a separate word in the Hebrew, there is so much comfort."

For all the wisdom of our Jewish confession rites, however, there is one significant drawback. For while the privacy offered by reciting scripted lists may help us to feel safe from public scrutiny, it can also cause us to feel alone - even in the midst of our fellow confessors. I believe that one of the reasons that Post Secret has become so popular is that it is blessedly normalizing - it reminds us that those "deviant" parts of ourselves are really not so deviant after all. This lesson is lost when we keep our confessions private each High Holiday season; we give up the opportunity to hear how very normal we all are.

We live in a world of secrets and are master secret-keepers ourselves; we have learned to keep the "shameful" parts of our lives hidden because they are embarrassing or make others uncomfortable, because we feel like we're the only ones who harbor such humiliations or because they conflict with the way that we wish to be seen. And so, usually with the best of intentions, we become complicit in creating communities where we each feel like "we're the only one," where we don't really know what's going on behind other people's doors or in their heads but imagine that it must really be quite idyllic. That is, of course, until something like Post Secret reminds us otherwise:

I believe that one day I will like myself.

I wish my parents could see me for what I am instead of what I didn't become.

I fear that I'm going to be alone for the rest of my life and I don't want to have to settle not to be.

These are the confessions of real people, and while they weren't written by members of this congregation, I am absolutely certain that they could have been. As we stand here this High Holiday season, I invite us to allow these words into our hearts along with those of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Ishmael, Hannah, Jonah and all the other secret-keepers found in our texts and in our congregations. We are all deviantly normal, individuals born with the privilege of experiencing both profound joy and wrenching despair. *These* are the complexities and anguish held within the human heart.

Later in our service tonight we will recite both the short and long forms of the Viddui, and I share these words in hopes that each of us might use this prayer to reflect upon what it is that we most need to release this season, what we most need in order to bring ourselves healing and to be able to enter the new year with a greater sense of wholeness and strength. But I also share these words because I would like to try something, and for this I need your help. I would like to create a TIC *Al Chet* - a list of *our* sins and secrets, the regrets and failures, sorrows, humiliations, hopes, and dreams that are in the hearts of this community to be read next year on Yom Kippur (and shared before that as an Erev Shabbat Thought). I invite you to anonymously submit your own post-secrets – to mail them to me in an unmarked envelope or put them quietly in my box in the office, to slip them under my door or email them to me from an anonymous account. I ask us to do this for our own sake - because physically letting go of a secret can be the first step towards liberating ourselves from its grasp. I also ask us to do this for the sake of our community - because hearing how very deviantly normal we all are is immensely healing.

I unfollowed all the people on Facebook who bring up bad feelings. It was life-changing.

I don't take my kids to the playground because I don't like talking to the other moms.

I have two master's degrees and a doctorate...but I still feel like a failure.

May we all have the courage to let go of the secrets that we carry deep inside.

G'mar Tov!

Rabbi Annie Tucker