

CHAPTER 2, LAW 3 - OF RODENTS AND CONFESSION

by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld

Anyone who confesses verbally but does not determine in his heart to forsake [his sin], he is akin to one who immerses himself [in a ritual bath] with a [dead] rodent in his hand, as the immersion does not help until he casts away the rodent. So too does it say, "And one who admits and forsakes will be granted compassion" (Proverbs 28:13).

[The confessor] must specify his sin, as it is stated, "Please, this nation transgressed a great sin and they have made themselves a golden god" (Exodus 32:31).

This week's law follows closely from the previous. Last week the Rambam outlined the teshuva (repentance) process and added that one must express verbally his regret. Here the Rambam states that although verbal confession is obligatory, it is pointless if it is not an expression of true regret. If one "confesses" his sin without correcting his behavior, it is utterly meaningless.

The Rambam (based on Talmud Ta'anis 16a) equates such confession to "one who immerses himself with a [dead] rodent in his hand." Immersion in a body of water (mikveh) is the means of purifying oneself from certain types of spiritual impurity. A dead rodent is an excellent way of making oneself impure again, basically undoing any benefit the immersion might have afforded.

My teacher [R. Yochanan Zweig](#) posed a basic question on this. We would think of unrepentant confession as a mockery. I'm "confessing" what I still do. That's more spitting in Heaven's face than repentance. What's the point of admitting to your behavior not in the context of teshuva -- you're boasting about your rottenness? Presumably, such is worse than nothing.

Yet the Talmud appears more generous than that. Considering its metaphor carefully, the Talmud equates such confession to immersing oneself while holding a dead rodent. Now such a person **has** taken the trouble to immerse himself -- presumably properly -- just that he immediately lost any gain achieved on account of it. If so, such really is worth something: Such a person did undergo a purifying process, just that he lost the benefit immediately after. By contrast, confessing what one doesn't regret is not repentance at all -- it is an insult and a mockery. If so, why is the Talmud so generous as to equate it to a short-lived immersion?

My teacher explained by looking at another case of "confession". Deuteronomy 26:12-15 discusses the process known as "*viduy ma'asair*" -- literally, the confession of the tithes. On the fourth and seventh year of the Jewish agricultural cycle, right before Passover, farmers were obligated to see to it that they had separated and removed from the house all of their tithes from the past three years

(see Deut. 14:28-29). After doing so, they would make a brief proclamation, stating that they had disposed of all their tithes in the proper manner, not veering from the Torah's command in the slightest.

The curious thing about this proclamation is that in it the farmer praises himself effusively: "I have removed the holy from the house, and I have also given it to the Levite, the stranger, the orphan, and the widow, as all Your mitzvos (commandments) which You commanded me. I did not transgress [any] of Your mitzvos and I did not forget.... I listened to the voice of G-d, my L-rd. I did as all You commanded me." Thus, the proclamation is one in which the farmer prides himself on his complete compliance to G-d's law. Yet the Sages refer to this proclamation as "the **confession** of the tithes" (see for example Mishna Sotah 7:1). Where is the confession? The speaker **praises** himself, admitting to his "rightdoing", not his wrongdoing? (Funny that the English language has a word for wrongdoing but not rightdoing...)

This is actually a famous question; quite a few respectable answers have been put forth. Rabbi Zweig, however, answered on an entirely more fundamental plane.

Up until now in these studies we have been translating the word viduy as confession. That really does not do it -- in fact can be quite misleading. For us such a word conjures up images of the confessional -- of unburdening oneself to his priest (or rabbi, or psychiatrist), telling him how awful he's been, and getting the guilt off his chest. Confession as we picture it is thus an alleviating process. You confide in someone else and in so doing relieve yourself of your guilt. By speaking it out, you work the guilt out of your system and feel refreshed (often a generous donation helps smooth over the process). You may even be so relieved to have the guilt off your chest that you'll be ready to sin again!

This most certainly is not the definition of viduy. It's true that the word "l'vada" literally means to state or express and the repenter must verbally admit to his sins. But it is not "confession". It is admitting one's responsibility. The farmer in Deuteronomy was **praising** himself. But the idea was that he was admitting to the several obligations he had and adding that he has thankfully fulfilled them all. Viduy is not expressing one's guilt. It is admitting one's duties. If I have discharged them, I can proudly admit to my well-fulfilled obligations. If not, I admit to them while stating that I have fallen short.

This too is the obligation of viduy the Rambam discusses here, as we shall now see.

Say a person does viduy but does not actually commit to change. As we saw, the Sages compare this to one who immerses while holding a rodent -- doing something worthy but immediately losing its benefit. We asked above that isn't it worse than useless -- almost as gloating over my deeds rather than regretting them?

The answer is that no, viduy means I admit that I should be better. I stand before G-d saying that I know I owe it to You to be a better Jew. I just cannot stop myself right now. Such an admission is an invaluable first step. Certainly its benefit is lost if I do nothing about it. But at least I stood before G-d

admitting this is not how I ought to be. I have immersed myself -- in truth. It is only that tragically, as soon as I depart G-d's presence, I once again plunge myself into the world of falsehood.

This understanding of viduy is so critical because it sheds an entirely different light on the repentance process -- and our observance of Yom Kippur. If we view viduy as confession, we might see it as buying pardons -- as getting the guilt off our chests so we can go back to enjoying ourselves the rest of the year. Every Yom Kippur we stand before G-d, fasting and banging our chests to pay up for the debts of the past year. By paying our yearly dues (both penitential and financial), we have now cleaned our slates and can **relax**. The burden of guilt has been lifted; we can take it easy again on ourselves, not worrying about how we act again until next year.

That imagery is so false it's not even funny.

What we actually do on Yom Kippur is own up to our obligations to G-d. Every time we bang our chests in contrition, we are not "punishing" ourselves and alleviating our guilt. We are obligating ourselves ever stronger: I must do this, I owe it to You to be better about that, I'm obligated to refrain from this. Yom Kippur is an enormous acceptance of obligation. I should walk away from it overwhelmed with a sense of duty -- as well as love that G-d has graciously entrusted me with so great a challenge and forgiven me for so many past failures.

I always say that the true test of Yom Kippur is how someone walks away from it as soon as it's over. Is he relieved, happy to have unburdened himself so he can go back into his usual stupor? Or does he walk away sobered and scared -- over the immensity of the obligations he has just undertaken. We unfortunately see far too many people run out of the synagogue to fill their stomachs and return to their ordinary lives. This tragically is far worse than immersing oneself with a rodent. To toss in another metaphor, such people have missed the boat entirely.

Far better would be to leave Yom Kippur realizing how much work there is before me. I have just admitted to G-d just how much I am obligated to Him. Certainly most of us cannot pretend we'll be perfect the coming year. Practically speaking, most of us will settle for selecting certain specific areas to improve in, hoping for some small but concrete gains. Of the many obligations we now realize we have, many will have to wait until later. But regardless, at least we have admitted our responsibilities; we understand the basic game plan. For that is the most critical first step of life.

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