

REFLECTION ON THE AL CHET PRAYER

Lyn Pearson, October 2, 2006

READING – a Chasidic saying

- “Failure to repent is much worse than sin. One may have sinned for but a moment, but may fail to repent of it moments without number.”

A story about not knowing when you need forgiveness

Years ago, I hired an employee out of an office in which I formerly worked. The woman’s manager was a friend of mine; however, I neglected to tell her I was going to hire the woman. To me, it was just doing business and at the time, I saw no reason to tell her. The woman’s hiring was between the employee and me and if the employee chose to tell her employer she was contemplating leaving – well, that was her business. As you might imagine, my friend took exception to this maneuver and word got back to me that she was extremely angry. Although I approached it as “just business,” she did not and it was only after some months of reflection that I understood her point. I had failed to walk in her shoes and as a result, I offended a good friend. I attempted to apologize several times but to this day she has not forgiven me for what I did. I believe I have done all that I can and I simply have to accept the fact that a thoughtless action on my part cost me a friendship.

This brings me to the

The Al Chet prayer, which is an admission of guilt through committing 44 sins against others.

If you’re serious about asking for forgiveness, you may not know where to begin. Either you’re overwhelmed by the number of things for which you need to be forgiven or worse, like me in the previous story, you may not even realize you need forgiveness. Jews have an excellent tool to aid them in this most serious of undertakings, the Al Chet prayer. The Al Chet, which is said frequently during Yom Kippur, is a series of 44 admissions of mistakes or guilt. Get to the root of the problem and you can eliminate it entirely; that is the goal of the Al Chet. The 44 statements comprising the Al Chet actually are not a list of mistakes, but rather identify the roots of mistakes.

Rest easy, I am not going to go through all 44 statements. However, I would like to give you a sort of “cooks tour” to give you an idea of how broad are the Al Chet’s admissions. The most important thing to know about this prayer is that it reflects sins or transgressions against other people, not against God or church ritual. It doesn’t necessarily cover the Big 10 either (murder, adultery, theft, coveting, and so on); rather, these are references to acts of civility toward your fellow humans. I’m going to briefly mention just 19 of the Al Chet’s 44 admissions. I’ve left out 25 that are a bit obscure or not easy to understand without a good deal of explanation.

So here are. . .

5 admissions that get you coming AND going

We ask forgiveness for mistakes we committed:

1. Under duress and willingly;
2. In public and in private;

3. Without thinking (or without knowledge) and with knowledge and deceit;
4. Willfully and unintentionally; and
5. Against those who know, and those that do not know.

So you see, you can't get away with anything

9 mistakes related to speech *because words do hurt*

A wise man once said, "You don't have to say everything you think." The Talmud says that when we speak, our lips and teeth should act as "gates," controlling whatever flows out.

Mistakes we committed through speech that was:

6. Harsh;
7. Foolish;
8. Vulgar;
9. Negative;
10. Scornful;
11. Endless babbling;
12. For telling people what others said about them.
13. For vain oath taking.
14. For things we blurted out with our lips.

Ask yourself:

- Do I think before I speak?
- Am I prone to thoughtless outbursts?
- Do I make hasty promises that I am unlikely to fulfill?

And 5 final mistakes for which we may need to ask forgiveness:

15. For mistakes we committed through having a hard heart;
16. By exercising power;
17. By being arrogant;
18. In refusing to accept responsibility; and finally,
19. For mistakes we committed through baseless hatred.

Ask yourself:

- Was I disrespectful toward people who are not exactly like me in practice or philosophy?
- When I disagreed with someone on an issue, did I let it degrade into a dislike for the person?

- When I know someone did something bad/evil, did I hate only the deed, or did I hate the person?
- When someone wronged me, was I eager to take revenge?
- When someone wronged me, did I bear a grudge?