

Kol Nidrei 5782
How Did I Get Here?
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When I first encountered Alice, the protagonist in Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* as a kid, I identified with her. She was adventuresome, outdoorsy, a bit lost in her own head, and had an urge to bring to the surface who she really was, if only she could figure that out. I melted at her words, "I give myself very good advice, but I very seldom follow it." But when she said, "Be patient is very good advice, but the waiting makes me curious," I wanted to say back, "Alice, don't punish yourself for your free spirit. Follow your curiosity!" Alice's problem, of course, is that she falls down the now-proverbial rabbit hole and wakes up to find that she has lost the sense of who she is. We do that, too. We get distracted from our pursuit of real truth, diminishing our potential and making ourselves too small. Or we forget how much we need others, become headstrong, and take up too much space, diminishing others.

The lure in Carroll's masterpiece is the White Rabbit Alice runs after, who has the sense of urgency she seeks. "I'm late, I'm late, for a very important date!" the White Rabbit exclaims, "No time to say hello, goodbye, I'm late I'm late I'm late!" He is a hare on a mission, and his sense of urgency activates Alice's spiritual awakening. She learns that she needs to figure out how to transform from a dreamer who has high ideals but gets sidetracked, to a human being committed to following her own truth. The White Rabbit dashes in to say, essentially, "we only have so much time, and we've already wasted too much!"

That sense of urgency is precisely what this day is about. We come here to seek our source, ready to right our wrongs, only to discover how elusive our best selves have become, because of our own missteps, habits, and misperceptions. This day creates for us an urgent hope to re-orient our lives. The author of Song of Songs muses, "I was asleep, but my heart was awake." This moment calls for our profound awareness, for us to make ourselves fully awake.

In an NPR interview, the songwriter David Byrne, of the Talking Heads, reflected on his song "Letting The Days Go By." He said, "We're largely unconscious. You know, we operate half awake or on autopilot and end up, whatever, with a house and family and job and everything else. We haven't really stopped to ask ourselves, "How did I get here?"

Think about when you have experienced a joyful moment in your life and wondered, with a sense of awe, "how did I get here? How did what started as a far-off dream come to fruition?"

Today is about the flip side of that coin, when we explore how we got to our less inspired moments in the past year, when we said too much or not enough, when we misstepped or overstepped or failed to take a step others were counting on.

Here is a true story about something that happened a few weeks ago. It was the day of his son's bar mitzvah, and "Jack" went to pick up his mother to drive her to the *simcha*, which was a few hours away. When he arrived, his mother *kvetched* about various aches and pains and a general lack of strength. She said she wasn't up to going. But she often *kvetched* and said she wasn't up to going places. On that day, Jack would have none of it. He loaded his mother into the car, drove her to his son's bar mitzvah celebration, and even insisted, over her objections, that she get up and dance. When it was all over and she was still complaining, Jack started listening to his mother. She looked unwell. He took her to the hospital and it turned out that she had just had a heart attack. Thank God she is okay. Jack is busy retracing his steps--where he did not respect his mother and harden his heart? Jack loves his mother. So how did that happen? How did he reach a point where he could put his mother's life in danger, rather than caring for her as was his true intention?

I have a feeling many of us have had moments where we asked ourselves how we got into the messes we have made.

You might think that on Yom Kippur, Jewish people try to scrub out the trouble we have created in our lives. But it's actually more like an excavation. Only after we have examined our flaws closely can we begin to imagine avoiding making the same kinds of mistakes again. *T'shuvah* takes longer than this one day. But on this day we have an opportunity to catalyze the cracks we have allowed to form in the foundations of our lives and commit to a better path forward.

That is the work of *T'shuvah* on Yom Kippur.

The 19th century Slonimer Rebbe, R' Shalom Noah Berzovsky, uses the image of a physical home to describe the process of t'shuvah. On rebuilding our spiritual homes--meaning, our moral lives, he writes: "The task of a person...is like...building an elaborate house on a foundation of rubble. If one doesn't want to invest money and effort to dig deep and solid foundations, the building will not have a strong base, and therefore cracks will keep appearing in the walls...and the house will always be in danger of collapse. The same applies in the realm of *t'shuvah*. They will solve the problems of their life only when [they] arrive at a state in which [they have] courage and understand all of those minor repairs [they might make], and dig foundations [that can be real] foundations, and first root out the root that yields gall and wormwood--only then [is t'shuvah possible]...This is the thought process with which a Jew must approach t'shuvah, to the point that the One who knows all secrets can testify on [the person's]

behalf that they really want to dig strong foundations for their spiritual home, foundations able to withstand life's trials--and the foundation will not be rickety, and the building will not collapse" (Netivot Shalom, Teshuvah #9).

We know about slippery slopes and points of no return. They exist. But as Jews, we believe even more in the power and possibility of T'shuvah. We believe we can turn our lives back around, in small ways and larger ways. That is the work of this day.

We have a time-honored practice where all of this comes home: The *Vidui*, which we recite 10 times over the course of Yom Kippur.

We begin the *Vidui* by standing together and calling out our communal sins, taking ownership for being part of a society where we and others cause terrible suffering. But the heart of *Vidui* lies in what comes next. Just when our defenses are martialling excuses for that list of big sins, when some of us might be thinking--"well, I didn't really do most of those things, I didn't do anything terrible on purpose, there were good reasons for my bad behavior, overall I'm a nice person, nobody's perfect," and so on, the *Vidui* forces us to crystallize our moral failures and shortcomings and pinpoint the places where we began to turn away from our best intentions. The root causes of our foibles spill out before us-- the small moves we made or failed to make, that led, or may lead, to real breakage. *Vidui* is often called "confession" in English, but it really means "to acknowledge with gratitude and awe." Other faiths have "confession." *Vidui* is a distinctively Jewish opportunity to excavate our mistakes and take responsibility for repairing our moral and spiritual selves.

David Byrne says that when writing his song, "Letting the Days Go By," he was "just riffing on some Southern preacher" and that his song is about not fearing the passage of time. Apparently, according to Byrne, we should let the days go by without worrying, because nothing really changes. Even when, as he put it: "(And) you may say to yourself, "My God! What have I done?" His message is not to dwell on it. Using the image of "water flowing underground, into the blue again, into the silent water, under the rocks and stones," his message is that life will go on. And that's it. Truthfully, I find it hard to believe that any preacher would preach that message.

In any case, the notion of "letting the days go by" is an affront to Jewish belief. We stand in awe of the power we hold in our hands, because we believe our lives are significant--emotionally, cognitively, and in the doing. We fear wasting the time we are granted in this world. Every step we take makes a difference. We do *t'shuvah* because we cannot tolerate the thought of reaching the end of our days without having loved enough, cared enough, done enough good.

I want to show you how Vidui works using a personal example that actually is difficult to talk about. Recently I was involved in an accident while delivering Rosh HaShanah gift bags. A bicyclist struck the edge of my car door as I was opening it and was very badly injured. The police officers determined that it was not my fault, but that does not keep me from feeling horrible about having had a hand in another family's grief. When we chant the first part of the Vidui together, I will be stuck on "Tzararnu," "We have caused grief." But crying out "Tzararnu," "We have caused grief," does not give me the space I need to excavate how such a thing could have happened. Again, the big failures we list in the first part of the Vidui are outcomes. To understand how we allowed ourselves to reach those outcomes, I--and we--need the Al Chet, called "The Longer Confession" in our *machzor*. Now, most of the root causes of bad actions do not apply to me in this particular case. I was not greedy, arrogant, or even unrestrained; I was not in a hurry, or on my phone. The harm caused by opening my car door at that moment happened without me knowing that I was going to cause harm: "b'lo yoda'at." I did not know that a bicyclist was in my blind spot. So in the Vidui, my work is to stay there, at "b'lo yod'im" and attempt to learn how I can be more mindful of what is happening around me. The second it would have taken for me to look would have averted the disaster. Although the police said I did nothing wrong, I wish I had done better.

We are not expected to be perfect, but we are expected to take ourselves seriously. The medieval sage Moshe Ibn Ezra taught, "No sin is so light that it may be overlooked, and no sin is so heavy that it may not be repented of" (as quoted in *Machzor Lev Shalem*, 234). A Chasidic Rebbe said that we should not smite our hearts punitively in the *Vidui*, but rather knock gently upon them. We are not here today to beat ourselves up or beat our wrongdoings out of our bodies. We are here to stand before God and one another in humility and commitment to building lives of meaning, and we do that by looking very closely at the parts of ourselves that need our attention in order to do better.

This day is fundamentally about making the time we are granted worthy of our existence. Like for Carroll's White Rabbit, when we understand that our days on earth are numbered, we feel the moral urgency that we need in order to change. Rabbi Yitzchak taught: "Two things are in God's hands--the soul, and justice. God says: "You watch out for justice, and I will watch over your souls." The number of our days is not in our hands. It is what we do with the time we have that matters and is in our control.

May we do the work we need to do this Yom Kippur, and may it give us the strength to carry one another through the year ahead.

G'mar Chatimah Tovah.