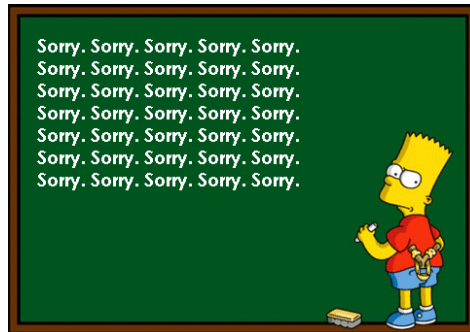


From the Rabbi's Desk @ Hillcrest Jewish Center

Rabbi Manes Kogan

D'var Torah for Kol Nidrei

5775



As you know there is a choreography of Jewish prayer: standing, sitting, bending your knee, bowing down, moving to the left, moving to the right, three steps forward, three steps backwards, and swaying rhythmically back and front.



While today may not be the right moment to analyze the different choreographies of Jewish prayer,ⁱ I would like to talk about one choreography in particular, unique to Yom Kippur: the *Ashamnu* choreography.

ai ai ai ai ai ai ai Ashamnu, Bagadnu, Gazalnu, Dibarni Dofi....

ai ai ai ai ai ai ai heevinu, v'hirshanu, zadnu, hamasnu, tafalnu sheker

ai ai ai ai ai ai ai yaatsnu ra, kizavnu, latsnu, maradnu, niatsnu...

How is your *Ashamnu* choreography? Do you stand with your head bent over or do you stand straight? Do you wrap your hand in your tallit? Do you hit your chest with an open hand or with your fist? And how hard do you hit yourself? Do you hit yourself lightly, almost like caressing yourself? Or do you hit hard, almost causing yourself pain?

I hadn't given too much thought to the Yom Kippur confession, of which *Ashamnu* is the first part, until a couple of weeks ago, when four local rabbis put together a program entitled "*Entering the High Holy Days*," at Forest Hills Jewish Center. On that occasion, each of the four rabbis analyzed a different High Holy Day prayer. I presented *Avinu Malkeinu*, Rabbi Skolnik did *Aleinu Leshabeach*, Rabbi Wise analyzed *V'chol Ma'aminim* and Rabbi Fryer Bodzin focused on *Ashamnu*. I found Rabbi Fryer Bodzin's analysis of *Ashamnu* very interesting, but what I remember best about the presentation was the "*Anti-Ashamnu*" song (to be sung to the tune of *Ashamnu*), written by Rabbi Rob Scheinberg,ⁱⁱ which Rabbi Fryer Bodzin shared with all of us present there.

It went like this....

ai ai ai ai ai ai ai

Not my fault

It wasn't me

It wasn't so bad

He deserved it

ai ai ai ai ai ai ai

Everyone was doing it

It didn't hurt anybody

Get over it already

You're too sensitive

ai ai ai ai ai ai ai

It's just the way I am

Nobody's perfect

I have to

I need to

I can't pass this up

ai ai ai ai ai ai ai

*Just look at it from my perspective
Think of everything I've gone through
I never claimed to be a saint
Why won't you
Forgive me already?*

Rabbi Fryer Bodzin had copies of the song for everybody to sing along, which not only created a good feeling of joyous camaraderie, but also added a note of humor, allowing all of us to somehow lower our defenses when addressing the difficult, yet important, subject of how to deal with our shortcomings.

What is actually going on in our minds when we hit ourselves during *Ashmanu*? Do we really believe we have sinned? And while most of us, if not all of us, can rest assured that we haven't murdered or stolen, can we say the same about betraying friends, gossiping, or being obstinate?

ai ai ai ai ai ai ai
Not my fault
It wasn't me
It wasn't so bad
He deserved it

How is your *Ashamnu* experience? How do you look at your shortcomings?

Is your *Ashamnu* experience like Rabbi Scheinberg's song? Do you maximize everybody else's faults while minimizing yours? Do you go through life justifying yourself and explaining away your poor behavior?

And when confronted with your shortcomings or criticized for your defects, do you come up with a cheap "I am sorry," while not really meaning it? Do you then speak behind the critic's back, accusing him of being too delicate, too sensitive?

Are you convinced that you are the best father, the best son, the best spouse and the best friend who ever walked the face of the earth?

If the answer to the above questions or to some of them "yes," then you are not hitting yourself hard enough during *Ashamnu*.

If you can see your reflection, even slightly, in Rabbi Scheinberg's song, then it is time for you to use the next few hours of Yom Kippur for soul searching and introspection. If Rabbi Scheinberg's song speaks to you, then you should take advantage of the remaining *Ashamnus* trying to translate each chest beating into a New Year resolution, to accept full responsibility for each of your actions, without minimizing or trivializing them.

Now, it may be the case -and only you know it- that Rabbi Scheinberg's song doesn't describe you, doesn't apply to you.

You may belong to a different group of individuals who knows very well the meaning of the word responsibility.

If you belong to this group, you are most probably a hard worker and people look up to you to save the day. Furthermore, more often than not, you do indeed save the day. People tell you over and over again, "We couldn't have done it without you! You are the best!"

If you belong to this group, people you come in contact with set high standards for you, but never higher than the ones you set for yourself! When things go well – usually because of you- you minimize your success or ascribe it to others, and when things don't go as expected, based on your own high standards, you castigate yourself, more than anyone.

If I were to write another "Anti-*Ashamnu*" song for this second group -also to be sung to the tune of *Ashamnu*- it would sound like this:

ai ai ai ai ai ai ai

I'm to blame,

I didn't work hard enough,

*It was my fault,
It's always my fault!*

*ai ai ai ai ai ai ai
I should know better
I let everybody down,
I knew it,
I am a fiasco!*

*ai ai ai ai ai ai ai
Now what can I do?
Of course work harder,
Much harder,
And even harder.
No pleasure,
No social life,
No hobbies,
No friends,
Until I get it right!*

*ai ai ai ai ai ai ai
No one will forgive me,
For my failures
I deserve it,
I understand them,
I don't even forgive myself!*

If your *Ashamnu* experience is like the one described in the above song, if you look at yourself with pity; if you walk through life lonely and depressed, then you may be hitting yourself too hard.

If your feeling is, "I am a loser, I can never get it right," then it is time for you to use the next few hours of Yom Kippur and the remaining *Ashamnus* of the day to

learn to love yourself a little more, trying to translate each chest beating into a soft caress of love and forgiveness.

How is your *Ashamnu* choreography? How hard do you hit yourself? If the answer is too much or little, it is time for a change.

This Yom Kippur presents us with yet another opportunity to find the right balance in life between accountability and forgiveness, between divine expectations and divine love.

Of course, the only way to take advantage of this unique opportunity is to look ourselves in the mirror as though it were through the eyes of God.

I am convinced that when we look inside, deep inside, each of us knows who we are and to which of these two songs we belong.

However, if you are not sure, find a true friend, not someone ready to praise you, but someone who won't be afraid to tell you things the way they are, and ask him or her to help you with a reality check. These are simple questions you can use: What do you think are my strengths? What are my weaknesses? What should I change in my life? What should I be doing differently?

If you are brave enough to ask the questions, and are not afraid to hear the answers, you may not only be able to master the art of the right "chest beating," but you will create a new *Ashamnu* song for yourself, one that will help you to change what you need to change, to move forward in life, and to forgive others and forgive yourself.

The beautiful melody and the traditional words of the *Ashamnu* are not going to change and they will be waiting for us the next time Cantor Fuchs leads us in the confessional prayers. However, what we do with them, how we translate the melody and the words into a unique personal song, is up to us.

Let's take advantage of the gift of a full day of introspection and soul searching to become more responsible and more forgiving human beings. Days like these don't come very often.

And may God bless each of us and our families with a year of joy, health, fulfillment and peace, with a good and sweet year.

ⁱ For a good introduction to the subject of Jewish prayer choreography you may want to read: Physical Movement in Jewish Prayer (My Jewish Learning) by Rabbi Joshua Rabin. http://www.myjewishlearning.com/practices/Ritual/Prayer/Prayer_Music_and_Liturgy/Physical_Movement.shtml?p=2

ⁱⁱ <http://rabbischeinberg.blogspot.com/2013/08/the-anti-ashamnu-to-be-sung-to-tune-of.html>