

## Yom Kippur 5783

### The Coffin Confessor

Imagine you're sitting at a dear friend's funeral, listening to the psalms and eulogies in his memory. Suddenly, someone in the pews jumps up to the front, interrupts the sermonizer, saying, "Excuse me, but I'm going to need you to sit down...The man in the box," he says, motioning toward the coffin, "has a few things to say." [1] The intruder proceeds to share the secrets of the deceased man, things he didn't feel he could say while he was alive.

This is a true story. The interloper calls himself "the Coffin Confessor." He is a private investigator in Australia. The Coffin Confessor stumbled into this unique line of work when he was asked by a dying man to call out his best friend at his funeral for hitting on his wife. I have to admit that I was horrified as I listened to this story on *This American Life*. Was it because I officiate at funerals, and this would be my nightmare? I don't think it was just that. I think what bothered me was the idea that there was something the deceased could have said to his best friend- and didn't. He left it for someone else to say. But at this point, I

couldn't turn off the radio, like not being able to look away from a crash. After that first funeral, it caught on. He was asked by a Catholic woman to tell the assembled that her true love was not her husband, but her best, female, friend. Next was a man who won the lottery and pretended the rest of his life to be a top-notch businessman. He had even fooled his own wife into thinking he went to work every day and after a while, it felt like it was too late to tell the truth. But he wanted to clear the slate at his funeral.

He confessed for a biker, buried with his Harley Davidson. The Confessor spoke the following to a very tough group of men assembled at his funeral: "Now that I'm gone, I have something to tell you. as some of you might have known deep down or suspected: I was bisexual. I was in love with a man, and that man stands amongst you right now...I know you're all looking around trying to figure out who he is. You're not going to know unless he tells you. But I want him to know I loved him with everything I had." He went on with instructions for the group, "Live well, ride safe, and be true to yourself. That's something I wasn't, but wished I was. Remember me by remembering to live with no regrets." The postscript to this one is that his lover got in touch

with the Confessor later and said that when the time comes, he'll be doing the same thing.

The list went on. Many of the secrets people held had been unknown even to the Coffin Confessor until that fateful day arrived and he opened an envelope that had been waiting for him. In his office, he has “envelope after envelope of secrets...” from people who have been holding onto...something. A regret. A truth. An apology. Not all of them are so dramatic; some are merely people who never found the right words before, like how much they loved their family or friends.[2] And some weren't even coffin confessions. People hire him to destroy things in their homes they don't want anyone to know about: the post-mortem home sweep. One person just wanted those who had wronged him to know they were forgiven.

He remarks about his unusual job that, “Maybe this was something people needed—a way to reclaim some agency over how our deaths are marked, the way we're remembered....[by] granting them one last wish, a way for the powerless to leave the world with their conscience clear and the slate wiped clean.”[3]

These words really struck me. How was their slate wiped clean if they avoided any responsibility? Any confrontations or processing? How did that grant them power, or was their power gained at the expense of those left behind?

A slate wiped clean...that sounds familiar on this day of atonement. But not quite. As I was listening it dawned on me that Yom Kippur would have an opinion about this. I imagine the day of Yom Kippur saying: "Don't do it! Don't live or die like this-with secrets and regrets! Don't go on living a life you never wanted." This holy day, in its ancient brilliance, asks us to confront that which is most uncomfortable about our lives-- and to change it. Yom Kippur says, "Don't hire this guy! Don't leave people sitting in the pews with your mess." Whoever is in the coffin escapes facing their problems face to face. And they don't allow for the people who likely loved them most to process the information relayed. They get the final word, without having to engage in the messiness of human relationships. Appealing, I know. But Yom Kippur says, "no."

So the program ended with me, exasperated, sitting in my car in my driveway. But I realized as I sat there that I don't blame the Coffin Confessor-he is just the messenger, after all. And since he's in Australia, I don't really think you're going to call on him to disrupt services at Sha'ar Zahav. I thought about the diversity of reasons people come to him. There were those who felt like this was the only way the truth was ever going to be heard. Those who kept a secret about themselves, as opposed to those who had a secret about someone else. The stories of people coming out after death resonated. In our community, we know that coming out -whether it is about your identity or anything else- is strictly your own choice. Many have decided that it is safer to be private about their lives in one or more of their life settings. There are reasons why some of us live-and die- with secrets.

The Coffin Confessor himself doesn't seem thrilled with the role he has been given. He is pained at hearing these stories, how much people hide during their lives. About the bisexual biker, he wrote that he's sad "...for all the other[s] still living in the closet because they are scared of how those around them might react. ...lying to [others] but also to themselves. Everyone has their secrets. Most people are buried with them." [4] He sometimes

would unfold a letter at a funeral, and it would instantly become clear to him and everyone else there “how different things might have been if they’d just had the guts to share a few home truths during their life.”[5]

In Judaism, we have a tradition of unburdening ourselves before we are gone--our death bed confession, called in Hebrew, *Vidui*. We say these words ourselves, or others can say them if we are no longer able. There are many versions and no single, set liturgy. In our SZ siddur, it reads, “I acknowledge before You, Eternal One...that both my healing and death are in Your hands. May it be Your will that I heal completely, but if I die, may my death atone before You for the harm I have done in life. ...” And of course we also have one for agnostics: “If my consciousness should continue on, beyond my physical body-let these thoughts of doubt serve as my confession of the heart-and in death, may I know a oneness of being with that which I was unable to grasp during my life.”[6]

The cantor and I have said these words to some of our beloved members. Maybe you have, too. And I have, on occasion, been privy to what people are grappling with on their deathbeds, both

as a rabbi and as a family member. Think of what people learn as a loved one is dying. Sometimes, there is unfinished business. Many have learned they're Jewish as an elder was dying. People may hold difficult memories, like a history of abuse. For many, knowing they are close to death is the time to get their house in order, whatever that may mean to them. As Stephen Levine wrote in his book, *A Year to Live*, "Some don't catch up with their life until a few days, hours, or seconds before their death." [7]

When people go to the Coffin Confessor, perhaps they are actually saying their *Vidui*. [chant]: These are the things I've done or were done to me...I lived a lie all these years-I've been carrying a load that is so heavy.

I imagine the calm that people express after meeting with him is not because they know their peace will be said after they die. These folks, many of them distrustful of organized religion, have found in him a pastoral presence they can stomach. They unload what they've been holding onto and are able to release at least some of what they've been carrying. They tell the truth to another human being-and maybe more importantly, to themselves, before they die. The Confessor admits that, "...for some, it may be the most honest they've been with themselves their whole lives". [8]

They hear the words out loud, often for the first time. They catch up with their lives-sometimes just in time.

So... why wait? The Vidui is part of the spiritual work we do if we know death is imminent, but it is *also* what we do *now*, on Yom Kippur. Among the rituals we observe that imitate and prepare us for our own deaths, we say a form of the *Vidui*. Although the words are different, it holds the same power as our deathbed confession. This spiritual practice is one of vulnerability. Loving ourselves enough that we can open the floodgates and admit to ourselves what we usually succeed in pushing away: knowing that we are worthy of being alive, of being written in the Book of Life for another year. Living ...despite our shortcomings. This practice is not only about the ways we've missed the mark. It's like tashlich, when we release into the sea whatever burden we don't want to carry into a fresh, new year. The Vidui and Tashlich are acts of self-love because they assume that each of us is valued enough and lovable enough to live in a way that is consonant with our truest selves. Why prepare for our death on Yom Kippur? So we are released to live our lives more fully. We talk at Sha'ar Zahav quite a bit about each of us being created in the Divine image, each of us worthy. SZ was founded on the principle that



there should be at least one place in our lives where we can be fully honest about who we are. Yet, I imagine a lot of us still hold onto secrets. Many hold onto shame, even if, intellectually, we know it can be let go.

Yom Kippur asks us to tell the truth. There may be deep-seated reasons we can't reveal certain truths to the world. But Yom Kippur asks us, at the very least, not to lie to *ourselves*, and if there is some notion of a divine presence in our lives, not to lie to G!d. If we are able to do this work, tomorrow night at sundown, we might feel that same release the Confessor's clients felt.

Does it always makes sense to speak the truth? Are there things that we really need to hold onto until we die? Of course. There are sometimes inherent dangers in speaking the truth. We have to ask ourselves, if we want to reveal something big, to what end? To hurt someone else in order to free ourselves? Could it cause harm to others? Perhaps some things need to be buried. But I think that, most of the time, we could stand to bring more of our authentic selves to our lives.

This Yom Kippur, as we spend a day facing our own mortality, I ask you: If *you* were to hire the Coffin Confessor, what would your last request be? ...And is there *any way* you could accomplish that while you're alive?

The Coffin Confessor fancies himself a knower of secrets. In our tradition, that role is reserved for G!d. We learn this through a blessing found in the Talmud:

Baruch Atah Havaya, Eloheinu ruach ha'olam, hacham harazim.

Blessed is the Holy One of Blessing, the knower of secrets.

Will you tell *someone* your truths this Yom Kippur?

Please turn to p.82 for your Vidui.

---

[1] The Coffin Confessor, Edgar, Bill, p.

[2] P.220

[3] Pp.42-3

[4] The Coffin Confessor, 69%

[5] P.220

[6] Siddur SZ pp.516-7

[7] P.27

[8] Coffin Confessor, p.77