

A Crash-Course in Teshuvah

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Yom Kippur 5786/October 2025

Sometimes the stories we tell ourselves come crashing down.

It's a beautiful August morning, and I wake at dawn. I write a goodbye note to Ida Rae and Sarah, my friends who are still asleep, and leave our Airbnb in Packwood, Washington. We spent the prior day on a truly awesome hike in Mount Rainier Park; dined at a local eatery; and stayed up until 2 am, spending the whole evening chattering, laughing, crying, laughing *and* crying.

At 6:30 am, I tiptoe out of the house, sad to leave my friends behind but excited for my excursion. I'm heading to my first meeting later that morning with Beth Am's newest rabbi, Jesse Epstein. I get into my 2014 Mazda, whom I lovingly call Mabel, and after several tries with the outdated technology, finally connect to my audiobook, *The Dovekeepers* by Alice Hoffman. I stop at Mountain Goat Coffee for a to-go latte and begin on the long trek back to Seattle.

An hour and a half pass, and the road spans endlessly before me. I yawn, admitting to myself that I'm tired. I crank the volume of the audio book and Tovah Feldshuh, the narrator, all but yells in my ear. As my eyelids droop, I slug a huge gulp of coffee. I swerve a little, and, in shock, yank up the air-conditioning, to freeze myself into wakefulness.

All goes dark, then: CRASH! I feel a thump, lunge forward, and my eyes open to airbags inflating around me. Behind them, through muddied, muck-filled windows, all I see are walls of dirt, like the inside of a grave. I grab my knapsack, open the door, and miraculously walk out of the car. I'm guided out of the ditch by the most compassionate bystanders. Mabel is totaled. I am unharmed yet stunned.

Between this Yom Kippur and the next, God willing, I will turn 60. The story I told myself the morning of the crash is that I'm still a young woman who's a night owl, who's able to spend all day hiking, defer sleep until 2 AM, and still have full cognition a few hours later, on the long drive home. *That* story crashed long before Mabel ever hit the ditch; I just didn't know it.

On Yom Kippur, we reflect on the ways in which we didn't show up as our best selves in the last year. We take this day to engage in *teshuvah* to help us clear the slate for the new year. *Teshuvah* is a painful business. It's not pretty. *Teshuvah*, the act of recognizing our wrongdoing, confessing it aloud, apologizing to injured parties, and making amends is hard work. It can feel shameful to bring up our worst moments of the last year—when we cause others or ourselves harm, either intentionally or not.

As Rabbi Benay Lappe teaches, this season encourages us to ask ourselves: "What stories have we been telling ourselves which are no longer serving us? What stories are actually causing us harm? What old stories am I still telling myself-about myself, about [my parents], about my child, about those whom I haven't even considered to even be in my story—that may be holding [me] in a place of suffering? What new story do I want to be a part of?"¹

In this sense, Mabel getting totaled became an opportunity for *teshuvah*. It propelled me to rethink whether my intentions and actions and abilities are all aligned. It became a moment for me to transform into a more authentic version of myself. That is, it was time to tell myself a new story: I am an aging woman who needs to move slower and more cautiously through the world than my younger self did.

Teshuvah opens a path between sin and perfection and offers us a third option, a pathway toward a more wholly and holy integrated self. While *teshuvah* is a complex process, the confessional prayers of Yom Kippur, the *vidui*, the verbal, communal litanies of sin, become a crash-course in the transformative power of *teshuvah*.

On Yom Kippur, we do the hard work of *teshuvah* so we can jump fully into the year ahead. Our tradition promises that if we "dwell in the muck" today, as one Sage put it, then in the year when we can "string pearls for the sake of heaven."² We can emerge as a better version of ourselves. We become better, not perfect; we'll be back again next year.

That's the nature of being human, and therefore that's the nature of *teshuvah*.

¹ Rabbi Benay Lappe, <https://www.flipsnack.com/svarayeshiva/elul-reader-5785/full-view.html>

² Buber, Martin. *Tales of the Hasidim* (p. 569). Kindle Edition.

Part of the pull of the Days of Awe is the sense that even in Seattle, even in 2025, we are being drawn in by the magnetism of ancient rituals. Confession in Judaism has its roots in an early crisis in Jewish history, the fall of the first Temple, and the Babylonian exile of the 6th century BCE. It was a time of great destabilization in our ancestors' world—especially for those exiled to Babylonia, but also for those who remained in the land of Israel. They were thrust into an existential crisis: who were they, and who was God, if the Temple no longer stood?

These ancestors, as recorded by the Hebrew prophets, did something extraordinary: they gathered to fast, lament, and confess their sins together. Our ancestors could have pretended nothing happened and gone back to their old practices, or more likely, could have rejected Adonai altogether, and latched onto another seemingly more powerful deity. Instead, they believed in the *b'rit*, the love at the heart of our divine-human covenant and found another way: they took personal responsibility for the way they failed to engage in behaviors that reflect our highest *mitzvot*, our most elevated sacred obligations.

For these 6th century BCE ancestors, their confessions were accompanied by sacrifices. Generations and generations and generations later, in 70 CE, when the Second Temple crashed at the hands of the Roman army, the early rabbinic sages found themselves in another existential crisis and asked the same question—who are we, and who is God without the Temple? The *vidui*, our confession for Yom Kippur, evolved as part of the rabbinic enterprise to substitute prayers and study for the sacrificial system.

The Hebrew word for confession, *Vidui*, is connected to the Hebrew word *hitvadah*, to reveal oneself. When we face the truth of ourselves, we clear the way to apologize, make amends, and emerge renewed. Our words bring our brokenness to light and reveal how we can engage in repair in the future. In the purest sense, hidden within the recitation of our wrongdoings lies the seeds of a *mitzvah* waiting to be performed.

During the *vidui*, it is a custom to tap our hearts as we bear witness to our mistakes. It's part of the crash-course in *teshuvah*; we seek to crack open our hearts and embrace the fullness of who we are. My teacher, Rabbi Lawrence Kushner, reminds us that confession is not about beating ourselves up or rejecting who we are. Rather, it is about opening the door to healing — the kind of healing that only begins when we feel regret and then move toward self-acceptance. This doesn't mean we are proud of our mistakes. It means we are willing to face them honestly, to bring them back into ourselves, and to acknowledge that they are part of our story, part of the soul-work we carry forward. As Rabbi Kushner teaches: "For this reason, when we recite the *Al Chet* or *Ashamnu*, we don't hit ourselves; we *hold* ourselves and cry."³

³ Hoffman, Rabbi Lawrence A.. We Have Sinned: Sin and Confession in Judaism—Ashamnu and Al Chet (Location 4219). Kindle Edition.

We recite these litanies, not for their specifics but, perhaps, as an expression of our vulnerability, our weaknesses, our misguidedness. We give voice to our wrongdoings in public, in the plural, because any interpersonal harm frays the social fabric that ties us all together. We hold one another accountable, and we accept responsibility. In Judaism *teshuvah*, return and repair, is separate from *m'chilah*, forgiveness. We hope for forgiveness, but it's not always achievable. *Teshuvah*, though, is always available to us, even when forgiveness can't or won't be granted. In case we need a jump start for *teshuvah*, the confessional prayers for Yom Kippur are a launching pad to the wholeness that accompanies *teshuvah*, the letting go of stories that no longer serve us.

Ironically, *The Dovekeepers*, the book I was listening to before I drove into the ditch, was a novel about the fall of the Second Temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE, and the final battle at the fortress of Masada a few years later. Masada, you will remember, concluded with the mass-suicide of the Jewish zealots bunkered there, thereby assuring Roman victory over Jerusalem. The novel centers around the only survivors of this tragedy, two women and five children, who lived through collapse, trauma, and exile.

It is not lost on me that I was listening to a story about a literal and spiritual crash as I was in the middle of my own. A story about a civilization in freefall, as I was spinning off the road, unconscious of the danger I had put myself in—or, God forbid, put others in. I was unaware of the story I had been stubbornly clinging to.

The road back from a crash—any crash—is long. Whether it's a personal one, or a communal one, or a generational one.

As Rabbi Lappe has taught: "*Teshuva* is not about rewriting your history. It's about acknowledging some of the most painful parts of our relationships, honoring and remembering the pain and the violence, and then saying "yes, this happened and it caused pain," and expanding the story so that it has the space to hold not only our painful past, but a more liberatory future, for all of us."⁴ Whether it's the loss of the Temple, or a body no longer doing what it once did, or the painful realization that a beloved tradition we hold dear doesn't always reflect who we are or what we need.

⁴ Lappe, <https://www.flipsnack.com/svarayeshiva/elul-reader-5785/full-view.html>

Rabbi Lappe is Founder of Svava a queer-normative Radical Yeshiva, an organization that sees “the Jewish tradition not as a static inheritance but rather a flexible, adaptive legacy committed to change. By studying the ways the Rabbis overturned and upgraded their laws to create a more just society for *their* time, [Svava seeks] to uncover pathways to make similar change in our own time.”⁵ Rabbi Lappe and the Svava instructors teach what they call the CRASH theory of Jewish tradition and texts. As Rabbi Lappe teaches: “Traditions do *teshuvah*, too. They learn. We are not only their students—but their teachers. And may we each find our place in a new, more liberatory story.”⁶

In the year ahead, I’m thrilled to share that Temple Beth Am and Svava are engaging in a partnership, beginning with a weekend of learning about Svava’s CRASH theory of Judaism with Rabbi Lappe and others in December. The hope is that our congregation can learn from Svava’s pedagogy, and we can share with them the ways in which they can expand their reach to synagogues.

At Temple Beth Am, as we celebrate the past 70 years, our hope is to lay the foundation stones for Jewish living and learning for the next seventy years. The truth is, we may not recognize what our descendants will build upon those foundation stones, but we can feel secure in knowing that we have laid them down, creating a space for progressive religious Judaism in Seattle in the decades ahead.

Teshuvah is not about perfection. It’s about progression. Our ancestors didn’t just survive exile; they transformed it. They reinterpreted rituals, wrote new liturgy, and reclaimed their covenant—not by going backward, but by moving forward with honesty, courage, and compassion. They didn’t discard the tradition. They expanded it.

And so must we.

We gather on Yom Kippur as we do each year and recite *Al Cheit Shechatanu Lifanecha, Adonai*, for the sin we have sinned before you, Adonai. We let the ancient words seep into our souls and expand them with our own experiences. We reflect and realize that there are stories we have outgrown, whether personal or communal. Stories that once served us but now constrict us. Stories that once comforted us but now conceal us. The story that says we must be perfect

⁵ <https://svava.org/mission-vision/>

⁶ Lappe, <https://www.flipsnack.com/svarayeshiva/elul-reader-5785/full-view.html>

to be worthy. The story that says we cannot change, or that our tradition cannot change. The story that says our failures disqualify us from love or belonging.

Those stories must crash. Not because we don't love them, but because we *do*—and love demands truth. That's the promise of Yom Kippur. That no matter how lost you feel, how far you've gone, how long you've been asleep at the wheel, a more authentic life is always possible. But only if we are willing to wake up, crawl out of the wreckage, and begin again, discovering a new road forward.

That's why, on Yom Kippur, we recite the *Vidui*—the confessional—not once, but over and over again. *Ashamnu. Bagadnu. Gazalnu.* We have trespassed. We have betrayed. We have stolen. It's not because we are inherently bad, but because we are beautifully, *frustratingly* human. The *Vidui* is not a shame list; it's a mirror. A ritualized invitation to look honestly at ourselves—not to wallow in guilt, but to move through it. To say: Yes, I messed up. And now I begin again, as a better, purer, version of myself. Now I am ready to leave the muck, and string pearls of wisdom, of compassion, of justice in the year ahead.

So may we each find the strength to ask ourselves the hard questions. As we engage in the strenuous work of *teshuvah*, may we find the clarity to see what needs to be released, and the courage to embrace what is waiting to be born.

G'mar Chatimah Tovah. From this Yom Kippur to the next, may you be sealed for life as wholly and holy self, for growth, for return, and for love.

Amen.