

For Confessing Our Sins

Exploring the Al Chet Prayer

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When one begins to look at the task of teshuva (repentance), it can be overwhelming. We've made so many mistakes this past year that it's hard to know where to begin! Clearly, if we don't have an excellent system for tackling this project, it will be very time consuming, draining -- and ultimately unproductive.

In Judaism we say that if you can get to the root of the problem, you can eliminate it entirely. That is the goal of the "Al Chet" prayer that we say so many times during Yom Kippur services. These 44 statements are not a list of mistakes, but rather identify the roots of mistakes.

We'll examine the "Al Chet" prayer, one statement at a time. But remember: "Change" is a process that doesn't happen immediately. Don't try to conquer too many things at once; it may be too overwhelming. Instead, choose the areas that cut closest to the root of your problems. This will maximize your success in the Teshuva process.

1. For the mistakes we committed before You under duress and willingly.

How can we be held accountable for mistakes committed under duress?! The answer is that sometimes, we get into compromising situations because we are not careful. Many of these "accidents" can be avoided by setting limitations to avoid temptation.

Ask yourself:

Duress:

Did I put myself into compromising situations, and then when I got into trouble rationalize by saying it was "unavoidable" or "accidental"?

Have I tried making "fences" so that I won't transgress?

Have I considered setting up a penalty system as a deterrent against certain mistakes?

When I legitimately got into an unavoidable situation, did I stop to consider why God might want me to experience this particular challenge?

Willingly:

Did I make mistakes because I was lazy, or because my lower, animalistic urges were getting the better of me?

2. For the mistakes we committed before You through having a hard heart.

Hardening of the heart means that I closed myself off to deep, human emotions like compassion and caring. The newspapers and streets seem so filled with one tragic story after another, that I can become desensitized to the whole idea of human suffering.

Ask yourself:

Did I ignore the poor and the weak?

When I did give charity, was it done enthusiastically or begrudgingly?

Was I kind, compassionate and loving when my family and friends needed me to be?

Do I feel the pain of Jews who are assimilating, and of how that impacts the Jewish nation as a whole?

3. For the mistakes we committed before You without thinking (or without knowledge).

Every day, we should pray to God for the ability to think and reason. A clear mind is integral to our growth and development. If we're riding in a car and staring aimlessly out the window, then for those precious moments we are nothing more than zombies.

Ask yourself:

Do I carefully examine my society and surroundings, weighing out what is right and what is wrong?

Do I constantly review my major goals in life?

Do I strive for a constant awareness of the presence of God?

Is one of my goals in life to be a "thinking" individual?

4. For the mistakes we committed before You through things we blurted out with our lips.

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.

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?

5. For the mistake we committed before You in public and in private.

Ask yourself:

Public:

Did I do foolish or degrading things to attract attention or approval?
On the other hand, did I do good deeds in public -- that I would otherwise not have done -- simply so that others would see me?

Private:

Did I act privately in a way that I would be ashamed if anyone found out?
Did I consider how God is watching even in my most private moments?
Did I convince myself that because nobody sees me, the mistakes somehow don't count?

6. For the mistakes we committed before You through immorality.

When the Torah speaks of immorality, it usually refers to sexual immorality. Since sex is the strongest human drive (next to survival itself), it can therefore be used to achieve the greatest degree of holiness, or -- as we so often witness -- the greatest degree of debasement.

Ask yourself:

Did I speak or act in a way that lowered sexuality as a vehicle for spiritual connection?
Do I realize how sexual immorality reduces the spiritual potential of future, more holy unions?

7. For the mistakes we committed before You through harsh speech.

Speech is the unique human faculty, and is the way we build bridges between each other -- and through prayer, with God. That's why abuse of speech is considered one of the gravest mistakes possible.

Ask yourself:

Did I speak to anyone in a harsh and forceful manner?
Did I gossip?
Did I engage in idle chatter that wasted my time and that of others?
Did I seek opportunities to elevate others with an encouraging word?

8. For the mistakes we committed before You with knowledge and deceit.

As we know, knowledge is a powerful tool -- and a dangerous weapon when misused.

Ask yourself:

Did I use knowledge of a certain situation to deceive others?
Did I use knowledge to deceive myself -- i.e. did I rationalize away my bad actions?
Did I use knowledge to circumvent the spirit of the law?
Did I use knowledge to show off and impress others?

9. For the mistakes we committed before You through inner thoughts.

The Talmud says that "Bad thoughts are (in one way) even worse than bad deeds." This is because from a spiritual perspective, "thoughts" represent a higher dimension of human activity. ("Thoughts" are rooted in the spiritual world; "deeds" are rooted in the physical world.)

Ask yourself:

Did I think in a negative way about people, or wish bad upon them?
Did I fantasize about doing bad deeds?

10. For the mistakes we committed before You through wronging a friend.

"Friendship" is one of the highest forms of human activity. When we reach out and connect with others, we experience the unity of God's universe, and bring the world closer to perfection.

Ask yourself:

Did I strive to go out of my way to help friends, based on my commitment to be their friend?
Was I insensitive toward my friends' needs, or did I hurt their feelings?
Did I take advantage of someone who trusted me as a friend?

Did I check my email or answer my cell phone while listening to a friend, thus denying them my full attention?
Have I made a conscious effort to become a better friend?

11. For the mistakes we committed before You through insincere confession.

On Yom Kippur when we say each line of the "Al Chet" prayer, we gently strike our heart -- as if to say that it was "passion and desire" that led to these mistakes. Do we really mean it?

Ask yourself:

Did I ever apologize without being sincere?
Have I committed myself to "change" without seriously following up?

12. For the mistakes we committed before You while gathering to do negative things.

Engaging in evil as a lone individual is bad enough. But just as the secular courts treat "conspiracy" more seriously, so too God despises the institutionalizing of bad habits.

Ask yourself:

Am I part of a regular group that discusses negative things?
Did I participate in a gathering that led to negative activities?
Am I careful to associate only with moral and ethical people?

13. For the mistakes we committed before You willfully and unintentionally.

Willfully:

Did I ever "act out" in a desire to demonstrate my independence from God?

Unintentionally:

Did I make mistakes out of carelessness? Could they have been avoided?

14. For the mistakes we committed before You by degrading parents and teachers.

Parents and teachers are our first authority figures in life, and by way of association they teach us how to be respectful toward God and His mitzvot. The breakdown of respect for parents and teachers corrodes the moral core of society.

Ask yourself:

Parents:

Do I sometimes think poorly of my parents?
Do I ever actually communicate a dislike toward them?
Do I make the effort to appreciate how much my parents have done for me?
If I were a parent, what would I want from my children? Am I giving that now to my parents?
Do I give special attention to the needs of the elderly?

Teachers:

Have I maximized opportunities to learn from rabbis and teachers?
Have I actively sought the guidance and counsel of wise people?

15. For the mistakes we committed before You by exercising power.

God apportions to everyone exactly what they need: whether wealth, intelligence, good fortune, etc. Only when we feel our position is independent of God do we seek to dominate others for our own advantage.

Ask yourself:

Did I take advantage of those who are weak -- either physically, economically or politically?
Did I manipulate or intimidate someone into doing something he'd really rather not have?

16. For the mistakes we committed before You through desecrating God's name.

As a Noahide of the Nations, everybody is a messenger of God in this world, responsible to project a positive image.

Ask yourself:

Did I ever act in a way that brought less honor and respect to God?
Did I ever act in way that gave a bad impression about what it means to be a Noahide?
Did I take every opportunity to enlighten others about the beauty of Torah?

17. For the mistakes we committed before You with foolish speech.

People have a habit of talking for talking's sake. When we're bored, we may get on the phone, and "talk and talk and talk." Don't talk without a purpose. In any conversation ask yourself: "Is there any point to this conversation? Am I learning anything? Am I growing?" If you can't identify the point, there probably is none.

Ask yourself:

Did I waste time by talking about trivial things?

Do I seek to share words of Torah at every opportunity?

18. For the mistakes we committed before You with vulgar speech.

Did you ever find yourself in the middle of a distasteful joke? It can be insidious, but all of a sudden you find yourself dragged into a discussion that has taken a turn for the worse. Learn to switch tracks. Monitor your conversations, and when you notice them slipping off track, pull them back, gently and subtly.

Ask yourself:

Did I contaminate my mouth with vulgar speech?

Did I listen to vulgar speech or jokes?

Did I protest when I heard vulgar speech?

Do I always express myself in the most pleasant way possible?

19. For the mistakes we committed before You with the Yetzer Hara (evil inclination).

The Yetzer Hara is that little voice inside each of us that tries to convince us to pursue physical comfort, at the expense of greater spiritual pleasures.

Ask yourself:

Have I pursued my physical drives for their own sake -- without involving any spiritual dimension?

Do I resort to the excuse that "I couldn't help myself"?

Have I studied Torah techniques for channeling physical drives into holiness?

20. For the mistakes we committed before You against those who know, and those that do not know.

Ask yourself:

Have I wronged people behind their backs?

Have I wronged people to their faces?

21. For the mistakes we committed before You through bribery.

Bribery is most subversive because we are often not aware of how it affects our decisions. In the words of the Torah, bribery is "blinding."

Ask yourself:

Have I compromised my honesty and integrity because of money?

Have I compromised myself for the sake of honor and flattery?

Have I failed to do the right thing because I wanted approval?

22. For the mistakes we committed before You through denial and false promises.

The mark of a great person is a meticulous commitment to truth -- despite whatever hardships, embarrassment, or financial loss might be involved.

Ask yourself:

Have I lied to myself?

Have I lied to others?

Does my job ever involve having to lie?

Have I rationalized the acceptability of a "white lie"?

23. For the mistakes we committed before You through negative speech (Loshon Hara).

It is said that big people talk about ideas, medium people talk about places and things, and little people talk about people. Gossip causes quarrel and division amongst people -- and tears apart relationships, families, and even entire communities. As King Solomon said: "Life and death are in the hands of the tongue" (Proverbs 18:21).

Ask yourself:

Do I enjoy gossip?

When I hear gossip, do I accept it as true, or do I reserve judgment?

Have I set aside time to study Jewish law on how to avoid Loshon Hara?

24. For the mistakes we committed before You through being scornful (or scoffing).**Ask yourself:**

Did I mock and ridicule serious things?

Did I make fun of someone who I considered less intelligent or attractive?

Did I shrug off constructive criticism as meaningless?

25. For the mistakes we committed before You in business.

Integrity is the mark of every great person. The Talmud says that the first question a person is asked upon arriving in heaven is: "Did you deal honestly in business?"

Ask yourself:

Have I been scrupulously honest in all my financial transactions?

Was I harsh in trying to beat the competition, or did I seek ways for us both to thrive?

Have I chosen a career that gives me freedom to pursue my personal and spiritual goals as well?

When I was successful in business, did I show my appreciation to God for that success?

26. For the mistakes we committed before You with food and drink.

Eating is such an essential human activity, that the rabbis say all of a person's character traits are revealed at the dinner table.

Ask yourself:

Did I eat in order to gain energy to do mitzvot, or did I eat for the sake of the animalistic act alone?

What secondary activity did I do while eating: Did I read the paper and watch TV, or did I engage in meaningful conversation?

Have I made every effort to eat kosher food?

Did I express gratitude to God for providing me with the food?

Did I overeat?

Did I eat unhealthy foods?

Did I waste food?

27. For the mistakes we committed before You through interest and extortion.

Gaining financial advantage because someone else is destitute shows poor character. Noahides should always give a "hand up" rather than just a "hand out."

Ask yourself:

Have I made a profit as a result of someone else's misfortune or downfall?

Am I greedy?

Am I stingy?

Do I feel responsible for helping to satisfy the needs of others?

Do I appreciate the Torah prohibition against charging interest -- and have I studied these laws?

28. For the mistakes we committed before You by being arrogant.

The trait the Torah uses to describe Moses is "the most humble man." Humility is a key to spiritual growth, because it allows us to make room in our life for other people - and for God.

Ask yourself:

Have I made others feel lowly in order to raise myself higher?

Do I dress and speak in a way that draws extra attention to myself?

When walking through a door, do I usually go first, or let others go first?

29. For the mistakes we committed before You with eye movements.

Sometimes we can harm others without even saying a word. For instance, the Talmud discusses the illegality of staring into someone else's home or yard.

Ask yourself:

Did I look at someone else's private things that were not my business?
Did I gawk at an accident scene on the freeway?
Did I look at the opposite gender in an inappropriate and disrespectful way?
Did I signal my disdain for another person by rolling my eyes?

30. For the mistakes we committed before You with endless babbling.

Often we feel uncomfortable with silence, so we fill the time with meaningless chatter. The Torah tells us, however, that more than anywhere, God is found in the sound of silence.

Ask yourself:

Do I participate in conversations with no meaningful content?
Do I think before speaking and measure my words carefully?
Do I forward inane emails and post trivial content online?
Am I careful to concentrate when reciting prayers and blessings?

31. For the mistakes we committed before You with haughty eyes.

The Talmud says that a person's eyes are the "window to the soul." An arrogant person is therefore referred to as having "haughty eyes."

Ask yourself:

Do I communicate warmth and care to people with my eyes?
Have I avoided interacting with certain people because I felt they were too unimportant for me?
Have my career and relationships suffered because my ego is over-inflated?

32. For the mistakes we committed before You with a strong forehead (brazenness).

The Torah teaches that each of us has the capacity to do kindness, to feel compassion and shame. "Shame" means feeling embarrassed and remorseful when doing something wrong.

Ask yourself:

Do I examine the moral consequences before making difficult decisions?
Do I appreciate how my moral behavior defines me as a human being?
Have I studied what Judaism says about conscience and morality?

33. For the mistakes we committed before You in throwing off the yoke (i.e. refusing to accept responsibility).

Judaism defines greatness as having a greater degree of responsibility. Deep down this is what every human being wants -- hence the excitement over a promotion or raising a family.

Ask yourself:

Have I accepted family responsibilities, and gladly assisted whenever needed?
Do I keep my commitments to friends?
Do I show up on time?
Would my colleagues describe me as "reliable and dependable?"
Have I taken responsibility for the problems in my community?
Have I accepted my responsibilities in this world as a Noahide?

34. For the mistakes we committed before You in judgment.

The Torah tells us it is a mitzvah to be *dan li-kaf zechus* -- to judge people favorably. This means, for example, that when someone shows up an hour late, rather than assume they were irresponsible, I should rather try to get all the facts, and in the meantime, imagine that perhaps they were delayed by uncontrollable circumstances.

Ask yourself:

Am I in the habit of judging people favorably?
Do I wait to make any determination until I have all the information?
Do I sometimes "judge" God unfairly?

35. For the mistakes we committed before You in entrapping a friend.

Ask yourself:

Have I violated the trust of people who have confidence in me?

Have I divulged confidential information?

Have I taken advantage of family and friends by manipulating them into doing me favors?

36. For the mistakes we committed before You through jealousy (lit: "a begrudging eye").

Someone who has a "good eye" will sincerely celebrate the success of others, while someone with an "evil eye" will begrudge the success of others.

Ask yourself:

Do I experience resentment at the success of others, or do I experience genuine joy?

Do I feel that others are undeserving of their success?

Do I secretly wish to have my neighbor's things for myself?

37. For the mistakes we committed before You through light-headedness.

Sometimes we can forget that life is serious. We're born, and we die. What have we made of our lives? Have we been focused on meaningful goals, or are we steeped in trivial pursuits?

Ask yourself:

Do I spend time reading unimportant sections of the newspaper, or listening to frivolity on the radio?

Do I spend time with friends and colleagues discussing inconsequential details of sports and entertainment?

Do I waste countless hours on the Internet with no goal or purpose in mind?

Do I act with proper reverence when in a synagogue or learning Torah?

Do I speak about Biblical personalities and our Jewish Sages with the proper respect?

38. For the mistakes we committed before You by being stiff-necked.

In the Torah, God refers to the Jewish people as "stiff-necked." This is a positive attribute in the sense that we are not easily swayed by fad and fashion. Yet on the negative side, we can also be unreasonably stubborn.

Ask yourself:

When I'm involved in a disagreement, am I frequently anxious and upset, rather than calm and rational?

Do I think that I'm always right? Do I usually let the other person speak first, or do I always want to speak first?

Do I listen attentively to the other side?

Have I been single-minded and lost my objectivity just because I really wanted something?

39. For the mistakes we committed before You by running to do evil.

Ask yourself:

When I transgressed the Torah, did I do so eagerly?

Did I run to do mitzvot with the same enthusiasm?

Did I slow down when reciting blessings and prayers?

After completing a certain obligation, do I run out as fast as possible?

40. For the mistakes we committed before You by telling people what others said about them.

Ask yourself:

Have I encouraged contention, and turned people against each other?

Did I reveal secrets?

Have I studied the Jewish laws prohibiting such speech?

41. For the mistakes we committed before You through vain oath taking.

One of the Ten Commandments is "not to take God's Name in vain." Integral to our relationship with God is the degree to which we show Him proper respect.

Ask yourself:

Have I been careful not to utter God's Name casually? (Or worse yet: "I swear to G--!")

When I use God's Name in a blessing or prayer, do I concentrate on the deeper meaning of His Name?

Have I sworn or promised falsely while invoking God's Name?

42. For the mistakes we committed before You through baseless hatred.

The Talmud tells us that more than any other factor, hatred among Jews has been the cause of their long and bitter exile. Conversely, Jewish unity and true love between them is what will help hasten the redemption. The other part that helps to bring about the

redemption comes from Noahides who help their fellow man to see the truth about their Creator and spread the love and life that the His Torah is. This helps to bring unity between the Jew and the non-Jew and helps the world to come to love the Jewish people.

Ask yourself:

Was I disrespectful toward Jews who are not exactly like me in practice or philosophy?

When I disagree with someone on an issue, have I let it degrade into a dislike for the person himself?

When I saw a fellow Jew do evil, did I hate only the deed, or did it extend into a hatred for the person himself?

When someone wronged me, was I eager to take revenge?

When someone wronged me, did I bear a grudge?

43. For the mistakes we committed before You in extending the hand.

Ask yourself:

Have I withheld from touching things that don't belong to me?

Have I stretched forth my hand to the poor and the needy?

Have I joined hands with wicked people?

Have I extended my hand to help in community projects?

44. For the mistakes we committed before You through confusion of the heart.

The Sages tell us that ultimately all mistakes stem from a confusion of the heart. This is why on Yom Kippur we tap our chest as we go through this list of "Al Chet's."

Ask yourself:

Have I not worked out issues because of laziness?

Have I made mistakes because I emotionally did not want to accept what I logically knew to be correct?

Have I properly developed my priorities and life goals?

Am I continually focused on them?