

Many of you may be familiar with the ancient first century custom of striking your chest during the *vidui*, the confessional prayer, consisting of a number of alphabetically listed sins recited a number of times in long and short forms numerous times tonight and tomorrow.<sup>1</sup>

The earliest source for the custom comes from the Jerusalem Talmud:

“The heart and eyes are two agents of sin; the eye sees, the heart desires, and the instruments of action, that is, the hands, complete.” (Jer. Ber. 36)

Hence, the hand beats the heart as if to denote that the heart caused wrongdoing. In Biblical Hebrew, the heart can be the seat of intellect. It is possible to read Rabbinic Hebrew texts either in this way or as we typically understand the heart, as the seat of emotion. So the Talmud understands the hand as the instrument of sin but the heart as either the intellectual or the emotional controller of the body. Therefore, the hand, which sins, indicates the agent which caused it to sin, perhaps so that punishment would fall upon the proper body part. This is stated is stated clearly in another Midrash:

Rabbi Manna said, “Why does one beat the heart [in remorse for one’s sins]? This is to indicate that all [evil] comes from there.” (Midrash Rabbah on Kohelet 7:2)

The codes of Halakha develop this practice further:

When saying the *Vidui* we stand somewhat bent over, without leaning on any kind of support ... (MB, 607:10; Magen Avraham 607:4), a position of abject humility and contrition.

*V'taher Libenu l'ovdekha b'emet*, Purify our heart in order that we may serve you in truth. The goal of our worship, our service, our religious practice, is to serve God in truth. Let’s define that as living our lives with honesty, opening ourselves to experiencing our connectedness with all of God’s creation. If this is our goal, then sin are those things which prevent us from experiencing that. Judaism has a lengthy list of sins, many of which are not obviously impediments to living an honestly connected life, but a detailed examination of every mitzvah is beyond the scope of this sermon. Our Yom Kippur goal is to purify our hearts of sin in order to achieve atonement, which is to say that we seek to wipe clean the whiteboard of our soul. This is a process that we started on Rosh Hashanah, or if you have been in shul on Shabbat morning, you have been hearing me speak about this since mid summer, approximately seven weeks before the new year began.

I’m intrigued by the practice of striking one’s chest. In particular, by the the implication of what one is doing by the way one does it. For example, some people beat their chest like Tarzan, or King Kong. The thump is audible across the sanctuary. It most likely leaves bruises. If the purpose of striking your chest is a kind of symbolic punishment, then this kind of thump does the trick. It reminds me of lashes or whippings - Ashamu! guilty! thump! Bagadnu! betrayal! thump! Gazalnu! theft! thump! and so on .... The early text certainly support this practice and one could argue that the Jewish notion of atonement requires that we unless we accept an appropriate punishment for our sin, we haven’t really atoned.

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1. The idea for this sermon was inspired by a comment from Rabbi Cecelia Beyer that came from a practice that she learned from Rabbi Rex Perlmutter, that “instead of beating our selves up over the ways we have "missed the mark," placing the hand over the heart in compassion shows we understand we have gone astray, and while this may touch our hearts and add to our pain, instead of beating ourselves up, we place a hand on our hearts as a symbol of sympathy, empathy and kindness.” I also drew upon an article I found at <http://www.jta.org/2013/08/31/jewish-holidays/at-yom-kippur-a-heads-up-on-chest-thumping>.

There is another way to understand the practice of striking one's chest, by comparing it to the use of a mallet to tenderize meat or chicken. It break down the connective tissue between the cells. You don't need to use tremendous force, a steady, pounding is enough. With respect to *vidui*, it's not meant to punish, rather to break down the barrier around the heart, to soften the heart. If you prefer, you can also think of it like a jeweler cutting a gem, striking it along a precise line in order to break it open. I can be stubborn. Sometimes, I don't get it right away that I've done something wrong. I'm probably not alone in this, that I sometimes have to be told more than once, and maybe the volume might have to be turned up just a notch on a rare occasion. But I do get it. When my heart breaks, it hurts badly and I want to make amends. so if I've spoken unwisely, *dibarnu* whap! *he'evinu*, misled anyone, whap!, or *zadnu*, done wrong, whap! ....

However, perhaps this kind of self-flagellation, tenderizing, or breaking open seems a bit masochistic. We speak of God as loving, compassionate, slow to anger and quick to forgive. Some people, when they recite the *vidui*, use a closed fist, but barely make a sound. It's a solid tap, like knocking at a door, but only those on the other side of the door would be able to hear. Some people are still softer. Their closed fist barely taps, doesn't make a sound at all. Perhaps we might envision the practice as simply knocking on the door of our heart asking, on God's behalf, to open the door and let God in. There was a simpler era when the phone rang or the doorbell rang and we would answer it. Now, we screen our calls with caller ID and an unexpected knock at the door is cause for alarm. but during the *vidui* we quietly knock at the door to our heart because we know who is knocking. There's no need to thump or whap or hurt yourself because you have the power to open the door if you want to.

In surveying different customs, I found others who use an open hand and touch their chest, which made me think of the famous "touch 'em all!" home run call, as if they were running the bases of sins. And we do touch 'em all. It is worth noting that the lists of sins are recited in the plural rather than the singular. We all confess each of them, whether we have committed each and every one of them or not. This may imply that we are not only confessing our own sins but also that we bear some responsibility for the sins committed by others in our community, *kol Yisrael areivim zeh lazeh*. Alternatively, the communal confession may be intended to relieve the burden of embarrassment on the individual, so no one person need be seen to be confessing to a greater or fewer number of sins than any other person.

I began to imagine other ways to practice this custom. What about an open hand on the chest, a motion similar to CPR, like a beating heart, something like CPR for the soul? The pressure of an open hand is warm and loving. When you have a pain in your heart, like heartburn, you might place your hand over your heart and press down to give yourself some relief. What would it feel to use use an open hand and simply press on your chest before each sin? You would be pressing each sin upon your heart, as if calling upon your heart to embrace teshuvah, asking your heart to repent, not with the threat of a fist but with the welcome of an open hand. You use a fist to break through a barrier, but you use an open hand to push something back into alignment. If a door is stuck, you push the door open. If we are stuck in patterns of behavior, we need a push on the chest to get back in alignment, to realign our behavior, to atone.

Another gesture to consider is the tap. A tap is a both a gesture to remind and a way to loosen dust. Tapping the heart could fulfill the function of reminding oneself of one's sins and the need to repent, or it could be a way to metaphorically tap loose and clean out the sins from one's dusty

heart. Alternatively, if the heart and the head are equivalent in Biblical Hebrew, the cerebral among you might tap your head instead of your heart to remind yourself of the times that your intellect led you astray.

If you enjoy thumping your chest, I'm not suggesting you stop. But if you don't have a specific heart-felt practice associated with the *vidui* confessional prayers or if you are open to experimenting with new practices, you might try one of these other methods of connecting your heart with your confession. Try using an open hand, a closed hand, try tapping or pushing, try envisioning opening your heart with love or adjusting your alignment or dissolving an obstacle or breaking through a barrier. Imagine CPR for the soul, embracing yourself with a warm hand. Tap your chest to shake loose the dust from the crevices of your heart.

As much as the fasting and ascetic practices of Yom Kippur take us away from our bodies, the *vidui*, falling prostrate for *aleinu* and for the Avodah Temple service, and other scattered moments during the service reconnect our bodies, our hearts, and our minds. You can see this as preparation for the next in the series of holidays, Sukkot, which we celebrate by literally placing our entire bodies into the Sukkah - it's the anti-ascetic holiday. So, my friends, as we continue now with the *vidui* and enter into the deepest part of the atonement ritual of Yom Kippur, my wish for you is that you will experience a Yom Kippur in which the barrier between your head, your heart, and your body dissolve so that you may experience joy and holiness in the beauty of God's house; and that you will continue to return to God's house many times over the course of the year and the course of your lifetime, finding many times to celebrate together with us.

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Addendum, post Yom Kippur:

Following Kol Nidre, I heard three sets of comments that were so profound that I wanted to include them in the text before posting the sermon online.

Shoshana Jackson: Tapping the chest – “I did this,” as if to say, I am guilty of this sin, or perhaps I contributed to a community which supports the existence of this sin.

Lanny Thodey: Open hand pat – “It's OK,” as if to say, it will be all right, it's not so bad, it can be fixed, you can make it better, you can atone for what you've done wrong.

Several people suggested that striking the heart might be understood as a wake-up call for the heart, arousing it to be aware of the potential for sin that the eyes and other sensory desires might be leading it into.