

Kol Nidre 5781

Rabbi Steven Z. Leder  
Wilshire Boulevard Temple  
Los Angeles, California

Tonight, Jews all over the world confess our sins. We say the *Al Cheits* in the plural, because we have all missed the mark this past year. We are all, after all, only human. There are 44 *Al Cheits* listed in the High Holy Day prayer book in the form of a double acrostic; each sin is listed alphabetically with two for each letter. Two for *Aleph*, two for *Bet*, two for *Gimmel*. Most scholars believe the earliest version of the *Al Cheit* is 2,000 years old and what amazes me about that is how little people have changed. The sins of long ago are mostly no different than the sins of today: A little gossip, some arrogance, a half-truth, fraud, anger, narrow mindedness. In one sense, nothing much has changed in twenty centuries.

But in another sense, almost everything has changed for everyone this year. The authors of the original *Al Cheits* could not have imagined a service beamed around the world on illuminated screens. Judaism changes. Our faith is timeless and timely. And it is in that spirit, during this strange and difficult time, that I want to share something new with you tonight from my heart to yours. You can call this Rabbi Leder's Covid Confessions:

***Al cheit shechatanu—For the sin I have committed against millennials.***

For years I maligned millennials. They were an enigma to me, seeming to lack the kind of work ethic I grew up with. To me, millennials seemed casual when they should have been more formal. They didn't think working from an office mattered, spent their lives on social media and communicated mostly with two thumbs flying across their phones.

Millennials, forgive me for not believing in you. For not appreciating you. For being too narrow-minded to see that you were right all along. The virtual lifestyle you created has literally saved the world during this pandemic. It is the reason that scientists can collaborate across countries, it is the reason we can get anything and everything delivered to our front doors, keeping us all so much safer. It is the reason millions of people can still earn a living when we have to stay at home.

If you are enjoying this service. If you have enjoyed our on-line services and classes and programs and messages—you and I have our millennial rabbis, cantor, teachers, administration and communication team to thank. They have led the rest of us older Temple staff into the digital age with patience, humor and very, very hard work. I am so proud of them and grateful to them. Millennials, a lot of us boomers were wrong about you. I know I was. *Slach lanu, m'chal lanu, kaper lanu*—forgive us, pardon us, grant us atonement.

***Al cheit Shechatanu—for the sin of suits and ties.*** You would think a rabbi would be secure enough in himself to know that appearances matter little and character, ability, dedication and passion count for much. But for more than three decades I have worried about looking the part of the rabbi for you. That meant a closet filled with 20 suits, 40 shirts, dozens of ties and shoes and belts from Italy and Paris. I don't know how many hours and how many tens of thousands of dollars or more I have spent over 34 years dressing the part of rabbi.

What Zoom after Zoom in t-shirts, sweats and a day or two or three of stubble has taught me over the past 6 months, is that I had lost my way for all those years. I had forgotten the Talmud's warning "*Al tistakeil b'kankan, elah, b'mah she-yesh bo*—It's not the vessel, but what's inside that matters." Because of my own insecurities I cared too much about appearances when I should have known better. I am going to stay looser when this whole thing is over. More authentic, more comfortable, more trusting that each of you knows and sees the real me no matter what I am wearing. For the sin of foolish vanity—*Slach lanuu, m'chal lanu, kaper lanu*. Forgive us, pardon us, grant us atonement.

***Al cheit shechatanu—for thinking I am not racist.*** I wrote my senior thesis in college about the great African American writer James Baldwin. Within my first five years at the Temple I started a Black/Jewish Young Professionals program called "Crossing the Line" that won a national award from the Religious Action Center in Washington DC. As a young rabbi I spent more time in black churches than I did in other synagogues. Many of the black preachers in town became my teachers and my friends. Betsy and I sent our kids to one of the most multicultural schools in the country. Me, racist?

But, like all of us, I watched those shocking eight minutes and forty-six seconds as George Floyd was murdered three blocks from Leeder Brother's Iron and Metal in Minneapolis. I watched the diner where I ate breakfast with my dad almost every Saturday morning of my childhood burn to the ground.

As the riots raged I called my friends who lead black churches and a few in politics armed with a list of things we could do. "Let's get small groups of Wilshire Boulevard Temple members and members of your church together in breakout rooms on Zoom. Let's get our teens and your teens together on Zoom. Let's organize a national show of solidarity when we ask all Americans to kneel for eight minutes and forty-six seconds. We'll get the Mayor behind it and the morning shows."

Each time, my ideas were met with two words: "Not yet," and each of my calls ended with pretty much the same sentiment, which was that people were too angry, too confused, and too sad to start a dialogue. They wanted to talk or shout and be heard and they wanted me to shut up and listen. I was shocked at the intensity and depth of their anger. I felt rebuffed and unappreciated. I'm a good guy trying to help, how can they say no to me? The cognitive dissonance was painful and it still is.

But like it or not, I have some *teshuvah* to do; some reckoning with my self-assured complacency. In the year to come I must ask myself hard questions; examining my own xenophobia and racist tendencies. I need to shut up and listen. I may have done my part 30 years ago, but I have a lot to think about and a lot to learn now. For the sin of believing we have done enough-- *Slach lanuu, m'chal lanu, kaper lanu*. Forgive us, pardon us, grant us atonement.

***Al cheit shechatanu—for the sin of the 10 and the 405.*** Once a minute is spent, it is gone forever. How many minutes, how many hours, have I spent on the 10 or the 405, or Wilshire or Sunset or Olympic sweating, cursing, stop and go, stop and go—for 45 minutes or an hour or more to sit in a meeting with four or five people I could just as easily have met with on Zoom? What I thought was respectful of other people's time and my own turns out to have been the most colossal and maddening waste of time in my life. From now on, let us all think twice before wasting another minute of our lives. For the sin of precious time wasted-- *Slach lanuu, m'chal lanu, kaper lanu*. Forgive us, pardon us, grant us atonement.

***Al Cheit Shechatanu—for wishful thinking and looking the other way.*** I have always been a non-alarmist when it comes to antisemitism in America. For the most part, America is a place where Jews are accepted, admired even, and without barriers to success. Antisemitism has always been a part of the far right and it is dangerous and it must be called out and fought. Now, sadly, the oldest of hatreds is undeniably embedded in the harsh rhetoric and politics of the far left. I have great sympathy for the words and sentiments "black lives matter." I have none for an organization by the same name whose manifesto accuses Israel of genocide and some of whose leadership openly spew antisemitism. To hear Jews express some of those same sentiments does not alter the fact that those sentiments are antisemitic, and it breaks my heart. For the sin of silence in the face of those who hate us-- *Slach lanuu, m'chal lanu, kaper lanu*. Forgive us, pardon us, grant us atonement.

***Al Cheit Shecahtanu—for the sin of pessimism.*** Thinking about the worst is easy. Maybe that's because news coverage of disease, civil unrest, corruption and scandal attracts more viewers and sells more commercials. Maybe it's a Jewish thing that after centuries of oppression we are more comfortable with bad news than good. Like the joke about the Jewish pessimist who says, "Things couldn't be worse." To which the Jewish optimist replies, "Of course they could!" Jew or non-Jew, it doesn't take much, especially now, for us to dwell on the dark side of life.

On the other hand, thinking about the best, most beautiful parts of life takes work. Awe, joy, gratitude, happiness even, are the result of a deliberate, disciplined, daily commitment; a forcing of oneself to seek and embrace something hopeful and good no matter how small.

Too many times these past many months I have allowed myself to sink into despair about the future. Life will never be back to normal, the vaccine is going to take much longer than people say, it's not going to be effective, not enough people will be able to get it, the economy is never going to rebound, my retirement money is never coming back, my kids are always going to struggle, I am never going to be able to visit my 87-year-old mother again in Minneapolis, or travel for fun again, or even go to the movies.

Hope; that is the art of being a Jew. This was true even in Auschwitz. A man and his son were imprisoned together in Auschwitz during Hanukah. One evening, the man took the tiny pad of margarine from that day's rations, tore a bit of cloth from his ragged uniform, fashioned the cloth into a tiny wick, stuck it into the pad of margarine and lit it on fire as he chanted the blessing over the makeshift Hanukah candle. "Papa," the boy asked, "We are starving here and need every calorie. Wouldn't it be better to eat the margarine to stay alive?" To which his father replied, "I can live for a day without food. But I cannot live a single day without hope."

When I lose hope I must fight harder against despair and cease to catastrophize the future. This is going to end. We are going to be ok. The bottom is not falling out of the world. To be a Jew is to make a conscious, daily choice to seek and celebrate the good. For all the times we have not done so-- *Slach lanuu, m'chal lanu, kaper lanu*. Forgive us, pardon us, grant us atonement.

**And finally, Al Cheit Shechatanu—for the sin of withholding my words and feelings of love.** I miss people so much. I miss hugging my friends and laughing over dinner. I miss being at the game with my kids. I miss my fishing buddies around the campfire. I miss being able to hold you at the funeral when your heart is aching. I miss being able to hug you at the wedding when your most beautiful dreams come true. I miss my mom...

With so much loss, with so much missing, I find myself saying I love you to more people more often, with a sincerity in my heart that is deep and true. Why must it take a pandemic for me to express my feelings of love openly and without fear? Why must it take missing someone so much for me to be able to say the three most beautiful words in all of human existence, "I love you?" In the New Year, may the ease with which I now say and mean and feel love remain when the virus is gone. For the sin of withholding our expressions and feelings of love-- *Slach lanuu, m'chal lanu, kaper lanu*. Forgive us, pardon us, grant us atonement.

*Aloheinu v'Elohie Avoteinu V'emoteinu*, Our God and God of our Ancestors, my prayer for the New Year is a simple one. May we all learn from our sins and embrace the lessons this year has come to teach us. For the sin of disrespecting millennials, for thinking too much of the outer image we thought mattered so much, for the prejudices we have denied but must face, for the time we have wasted, for the times we have looked the other way at the hatred others have for us, for our pessimism and, most of all, for the times we could have said I love you and failed, forgive us, pardon us, grant us atonement and grant us all a Shanna tova.