

# YOM KIPPUR SERMON

2009

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## INTRO

The YK confession we have just read (Viduy) is essential to Teshuvah (repentance, turning things around)—2 parts—AL CHEIT and Ashamru

My text: *Al cheit schechatanu lefanecha* —“For the sin that we have committed before you” interesting aspects (commentaries)

- Originated in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century
- Alphabetic acrostic
- In the plural (are the sins all communal? Are we the keepers of our brothers and sisters?)—material for a future sermon.
- In public
- Categories of wrongdoing
- Numerous modern versions with modern sins—eg environmental despoliation

The focus this morning is narrow--on CHEIT itself—“sin”

### 1) Jewish concept of sin

Our popular views are heavily influenced by the Christian societies around us, teaching that “sin” is an indelible personal stain. But this is *not* what AL CHEIT is about

CHEIT is actually an ARCHERY term, not a moralistic one—“missing the mark”

Imagery—a bullseye, on a target—visualize it. BOUNDARIES—CHEIT can be understood as being on the wrong side of a boundary, crossing a boundary

### 2) Boundaries

Altho notions of being “out of bounds” can probably be found in all cultures, boundaries as dual classifications are incredibly important in traditional Jewish halacha—law, practice custom

Is “al Cheit” referring to crossing such a boundary, missing the bullseye and hitting instead a colored circle on the target?

Some examples of Jewish boundaries:

- Kashrut—what is kosher and what is trayef? The rules of Kashrut themselves are full of boundaries—what you can eat depends on a creature’s means of locomotion, body parts, numbers of legs (eg, the Mishnah gives rules to determine which insects are kosher, one of which is “having 4 legs”—but biologists know that, by definition, all “insects” have 6 legs!) Anyway, it is allowed to snack on fried crickets while downing tequila shots in Mexico!
- Mehitzah, and other rigid gender divisions (eg, requirements for doing mitzvot)
- Circumcision—not only a gender division, but dividing males into the members of the tribe of Abraham (sons of Isaac and Ishmael) vs the strangers
- “schatnetz” (R. Everett Fox—“mixed stuff”), esp cloth of 2 types of fibers (anyone wearing a cotton/polyester shirt?)
- Intercropping, hybridizing of cattle (in the Holiness Code in Leviticus). As the anthropologist Mary Douglas puts it “Hybrids and other confusions are abominated.”
- Pesachdik and non-Pesachdik (as in dishes); matzah and chometz; “ma nishtanah”—this night vs all other nights
- Havdalah betw. Shabbat and the work-a-day week

ETC

**3) We are a Reform Congregation** –the origin of our movement involved crossing boundaries

- Praying with uncovered heads
- Not observing kashrut

- Travelling on Shabbat and holydays, such as most of us did today
- Using musical instruments as part of the services
- And increasing gender equality (eg recognition of patrilineal descent)

### **Are these “sins”?**

Perhaps we need to distinguish between moral lines and lines of behavior (although these are not always separate categories themselves! My mother used to refer to “white lies” untruths told to avoid hurting someone’s feelings—“what a pretty dress you have on today, Mrs Schwartz”)

We are not always in control of boundary crossings—sometimes we are challenged by behavioral lines that are imposed by our community or the larger society.

Whatever the original feelings in 19 C Germany when Reform began, we at KHN try to be respectful of boundaries while continually probing their significance, pushing their contours, and often crossing over the lines.

In this spirit I often think of the Havdalah prayer of R. Art Waskow—to God who makes the holiness of Shabbat and also the equal holiness of the other days.

### **4) Jews are inherently “boundary crossers”---**

Whereas the New testament book of St Paul’s Letters to the Galatians has him saying that boundaries have evaporated: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

Waskow also notes that when Pharaoh asked Moses “who is this God of yours” Moses replied “God of the Ivrim, the Hebrews” “Ivrim” means literally “those who cross over”—nomads, wanderers-- and Moses said that these people must leave Mitzrayim (“the narrow space” of Egypt, with its tight boundaries) and cross over to the expanse of the wider world.

So what does it mean when Jews call themselves “the Chosen People” setting up a boundary between ourselves and all other peoples of the

world? An ambiguous and problematic classification—chosen because we are better? Because we are different? To be exemplars?

This boundary is codified in Israel's Law of Return, in which a State calling itself democratic sets up different rules for Jews and for others, and claims it is "a Jewish State" even though 20% of its citizens are not Jews. What does this sort of boundary mean to us at KHN?

- 5) We at KHN instead tend to view a binary model as inadequate to describe our multivariate world, a world comprised of a set of continuums of values—gender is fluid and changeable, eating in moderation and with respect for sustainability may be more important than the rules of kashrut, intercropping can improve food productivity without using harmful agricultural chemicals, all days and all evenings can contain moments of holiness.

Yes, there are modern ways in which we may have "missed the mark"—not being careful in our use of resources, not being vigilant in respecting human dignity so that civil liberties are violated (and leaders of our country try to justify torture and wiretapping without subpoenas), perhaps not sufficiently caring that some citizens cannot get adequate access to health care, and so on. These are problems which don't always seem to present a duality of choice, but rather a spectrum of possibilities and nuance.

We need to be mindful of ancient boundaries, even when we choose to cross them. But as we try, on this YK and hopefully always, to commit to living ethical lives, we need to realize that we have chosen a path without simple bright lines between missing the mark and hitting it. **Despite the linguistic imagery of our YK prayer of "*Al cheit schechatanu lefanecha*" we must recognize the heavy responsibility we have accepted in making our way through our lives without always having simple bright line boundaries to guide us.**

May we all have an easy fast and be sealed for a year of righteousness.