Confessing our Virtues! Thoughts on Parashat Ki Tavo

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Ki Tavo

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

"I have not transgressed any of Your commandments and have forgotten nothing...I have hearkened to the voice of the Lord my God; I have done entirely as You have commanded me." (Devarim 26:13-14.)

Beginning with the month of Ellul and continuing through the High Holy Day season, we offer supplicatory prayers--selihot--asking God to forgive our many sins. A central feature of these prayers is "Vidui"--confession. We list all sorts of sins of which we are guilty individually or comunally. Vidui is an essential ingredient in the process of atonement. Unless we are able to admit our sins and shortcomings, we will be unable to change our ways for the better.

The word "Vidui" is popularly associated with our sins and our feelings of guilt. Confession reminds us of our inadequacies and our negligence.

In this week's Torah portion, we read of an entirely differt type of Vidui--the Vidui Maaser, the confession one makes upon paying up one's tithes. In Temple days, this Vidui took place on the third and sixth years of the tithing cycles. All unpaid tithes were supposed to be paid up on these occasions. The person bringing the tithes was required to make a statement, a confession, that tithes were properly given to the Levites, the strangers, the orphans and widows--that everything was paid in full. This Vidui included the startling phrases (quoted at the top of this article) in which the person professes to have fulfilled the commandments completely and correctly.

We are not accustomed to thinking of Vidui in such positive terms. This is not a confession of sins and shortcomings, but a confession of our virtues! We stand before God and say--without reservations--that we have done our best, that we have met our obligations perfectly. This puts an entirely different slant on the meaning of the word Vidui--confession.

Whereas we generally think of Vidui as confession of sins, we need to remember that Vidui also refers to our achievements. Just as we are obligated to be honest before God and recite our many transgressions, we are also obligated to be honest before God and recite our many positive fulfillments of Torah.

The Vidui Maaser is not to be recited in a spirit of arrogance or self-congratulation. Rather, it is supposed to be a candid review of our dedication to do that which is right and good. Before we can make such a Vidui, we obviously need to be sure that we can utter the words honestly. We will be sure to pay our tithes in full; we will be sure to provide for the needy; we will be sure not to delay in meeting our commitments.

During this season, we are focusing on the confession of our transgressions and on the theme of repentance. This week's parasha reminds us that we also should be focusing on the many things we do properly. Let us stand before God in honest recognition of who we are and what we've done--our weaknesses and our strengths. Confessing sins is an impetus to improve. Confessing virtues is a reminder that we have the capacity to succeed!

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