Honest Confession--Thoughts for Parashat Vayikra

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Angel For Shabbat, Parashat Vayikra

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

“One who transgresses any positive or negative commandment of the Torah, whether intentionally or unwittingly, must confess before God when repenting and turning from sin” (Laws of Repentance 1:1). In this statement, Maimonides echoes the passage in this week’s Parasha calling for confession of sins by those who bring sin offerings.

But why is confession so important? Why not allow the penitent to atone silently without actually verbalizing the sins?

Oral confession compels one to actually articulate the sins. Until one is able to state things specifically, it is likely that the atonement will remain vague. To say something aloud requires forethought.

But there can be (and often is) a gap between our words and what’s in our hearts. We may say “I’m sorry,” but not really feel sorry inside ourselves. For confession to be real, it has to be honest.

Confession isn’t intended primarily to make us feel guilty for our shortcomings. Rather, it is intended to help us face up to personal responsibility. God doesn’t need our confession: we do! Among the most difficult statements to make are: I erred. I sinned. I should have done better. It’s my fault.

Human beings tend to excuse themselves for their shortcomings. I failed because others caused me to fail; I fell short because the system is unfair. It’s someone else’s fault that I didn’t do well.

Not only do individuals transfer responsibility to others, but communities tend to do so also. If our group isn’t doing as well as others, it must be because of discrimination, racism, or systemic injustice. It’s not our fault: it’s yours, it’s theirs; we aren’t responsible. But such an attitude is self-defeating. Instead of blaming outside sources for our problems, we first need to evaluate our own deficits and how we can improve our own situation.

The first step for real advancement—personal and communal—is to confess our own shortcomings. Until we come to grips with our attitudes and behaviors, we cannot be spiritually healthy human beings. Yes, there are others who may contribute to our personal failures; but ultimately it is our responsibility to do our best to be our best.

Maimonides points out that confession is not only an expression of regret for past sins. It also entails a commitment to do better in the future. Confession is intended to be a moral “cleanser”: it is to be an honest evaluation of where we’ve strayed and how we can move forward in a constructive, healthy way.

Honest confession is not a simple matter. But without it, we undermine our own spiritual and ethical development.