

## Possibilities for Reconceptualizing *N'ilah*

Rabbi Leon A. Morris

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I wanted to speak to two categories of ideas related to *N'ilah*, the first inside the *machzor* and then the second what operates beyond the *machzor*. First, in terms of inside the *machzor*, if you have the source sheet, this would be the first source. One of the central pieces of the liturgy for *N'ilah* is the centrality of the *Sh'losh-Esreih Midot*, the thirteen attributes of God. This creates a kind of bookend because it's also a central part of the *S'lichot* section of Yom Kippur evening, of *Kol Nidrei*. We begin with this recitation of the *Sh'losh-Esreih Midot*. We end Yom Kippur with the recitation of the *Sh'losh-Esreih Midot*. There's great variance over how many times it's chanted. In many traditions, whatever the number is that they were recited on *Kol Nidrei*, it's twice that number for *N'ilah*. So, in some traditions it's four times at *Kol Nidrei*, eight times at *N'ilah*. There are communities that recite it thirteen times.

I wanted to just look at the Talmudic source for that, which is the first source on the sheet from the *Bavli*, *Rosh HaShanah* 17b. And it's commenting on the verse from *Sh'mot*, from Exodus 34:6, of *va-yaavor Adonai al panav vayikra*, "the Eternal passed in front of him," in front of Moses, "and called." And here, Rabbi Yochanan is reading it in a very literal way. Would it really? God passed in front of him and called? Rabbi Yochanan said, "Had the verse not been written, it would have been impossible to say such a thing." And then he goes on to say, "This teaches that the Almighty wrapped himself in a tallit as a *sh'liach tzibur* and showed Moses the order

See the sources  
on page 191.

Why do you think  
this piece of liturgy  
is so central to the  
High Holy Days?

of prayer. And God said to him, ‘Any time Israel sins, let them perform this service—the recitation of the *Sh’losh-Esreih Midot*—before Me and I shall forgive them.’” So, it’s loaded with this midrashic understanding that we have the power to remind God that God is *erech apayim v’rav chesed*. And this is explained beautifully in the Yom Kippur liturgy for the new *machzor*, *Mishkan HaNefesh*, it’s kind of paraphrased—this is our second text—just by saying, “This portrait of an intimate relationship with God, the Holy One wrapped in a prayer shawl showing Moses how to pray conveys the spiritual promise of the songs of forgiveness, for this is the moment when the veil was lifted from our face. This is the moment when we are no longer hidden from our Maker. This is the precious moment of renewing the relationship.” So that’s some beautiful phrasing that tries to reclaim the centrality of this part of the liturgy.

There is also, in terms of creative possibilities then, there is a great deal that can be done with the *Sh’losh-Esreih Midot*, and that same Talmudic *sugya* that we spoke about a few minutes ago for *Rosh HaShanah* 17b then tries to offer some kind of interpretation of each of the thirteen attributes. And just as an example of how much potential interpretive possibility there is with each of them, I wanted to just highlight the first: *Adonai, Adonai*. So, in that Talmudic passage in *Rosh HaShanah* 17b, the Gemara understands it as what’s being said is God is God before a person sins and God is God after a person sins and does *t’shuvah*. And source number three is from a new book called *In His Mercy: Understanding the Thirteen Midot* by Ezra Bick, and he plays up on this little interpretive sentence from *Rosh HaShanah* in which he says that what this really tells us is—I love this quote—history is completely different af-

Ezra Bick, *In His Mercy: Understanding the Thirteen Midot*, trans. David Silverberg (New Milford, CT: Koren Publishers Jerusalem, 2011).

ter sin because amazingly, it continues. So here in the repetition of *Adonai, Adonai* with this Talmudic understanding that it's a reminder that God is our God before we sin and after we sin, and then *t'shuvah* is the possibility of allowing history to continue, that the world doesn't fall apart when we sin but that we have an opportunity to reconstruct it.

I want to pick up a little bit on some of the material that Rabbi Levy and Rabbi Goldberg mentioned about the distinctive liturgical additions in *N'ilah*. And here, if you have the source sheet, you can see all those parts that they were referring to that come as a substitution for the long confession. We have the *Ashamnu, Bagadnu, Gazalnu*, and then exactly when we expect, because we've done it so many times, to move on to the *Vidui Rabbah*, the long confession, instead we have the words that are distinctive to *N'ilah*, which I want to highlight, begin with *Mah nomar l'fanecha yosheiv marom*—"What can we say before You, You who dwell on high?" And I think that's a very deliberate introduction to the fact that we don't have the long *Vidui*, that we basically are saying, "What else can we say? We've said this *Vidui* so many times, and just a moment ago we said the short *Vidui*, and we're not going to go on with the long *Vidui*, because in truth, *mah nomar l'fanecha*, "what can we really say before You?" Both Rabbi Levy and Rabbi Goldberg mentioned just a sentence later what our teacher Rabbi Lawrence Hoffman indicated to us in some teaching that we did with him, and it seems to be borne out by a study of the liturgy itself, the key line of *N'ilah*, *Atah notein yad l'foshim*—"You stretch out a hand to those who sin." And having made our best attempt for twenty-five hours at this point, we now rely on God. Extend Your hand to us. And it's in that same paragraph, of course, that same section that we

How does the message of these texts impact your understanding of sin?

Do these questions to God reveal a defeatist attitude or a final attempt to appeal to God or something else altogether?

then move on to what Rabbi Levy mentioned, *Mah anu? Meh chayeinu? Meh chasdeinu? Mah tzidkeinu? Mah yisheinu?* “What are we? What are our lives? What is our kindness? What is our righteousness?”

I think a lot could be done with that. And one of the challenges, one of the challenges that we’re wrestling with as editors of the new *machzor* is these few phrases that form the distinctive part of the *N’ilah* liturgy might be lost in the midst of all the other liturgy that traditionally occurs in this service, might be lost in the context of the larger *Amidah*. And that points us to source number five on the sheet, which is in the context of a Talmudic discussion about what *N’ilah* actually is. And there is an interesting Talmudic dispute between Rav and Sh’muel in which Rav says *N’ilah* is an extra *Amidah*. It’s an *Amidah* followed by some other prayers, just as is the case for *Maariv* and *Shacharit* and *Musaf* and *Minchah*. And Sh’muel says no, *N’ilah* actually consists only of this distinctive stuff that begins with—well he kind of telegraphs it as *Mah anu? Meh chayeinu?*, but we can assume that it’s all the stuff that begins with *Mah nomar l’fanecha yosheiv marom*. So, this is a very interesting, and I think for us, perhaps a very consequential Talmudic text in which Sh’muel floats the opinion that *N’ilah* may not actually be an *Amidah* but only these other key lines: *Mah nomar l’fanecha; Atah notein yad l’foshim; Mah anu? Meh chayeinu? Meh chasdeinu?*

Now, the Talmud seems to go on to refute Sh’muel’s view that *N’ilah* is not an *Amidah* and ends up presenting what’s traditionally done today, which is a combination of Rav and Sh’muel, which is yes, an extra *Amidah* for *N’ilah*, but also these special prayers about what can we say before You, extend a hand. But I think what’s interesting to us is this minority opinion of Sh’muel, and

it's something that we're thinking deeply about, that Sh'muel's view, that *N'ilah* may not consist of an *Amidah*, may allow some additional creative approaches that allow us to highlight these very distinctive parts of the liturgy for *N'ilah*. In other words, if we're concerned about these key lines of *N'ilah* being lost, we may have in Shmuel's Talmudic opinion a possibility of a different sort of approach, an approach that particularly highlights these key pieces.

So let me just offer a handful of ideas of things that go beyond the *machzor*. And a lot of these are things that many of us on the call are already doing. But I think it bears mentioning because although we have an awareness that the liturgy is an indispensable tool, there are many non-liturgical aspects that can enhance the experience. It was mentioned the custom of opening the ark—the ark is traditionally opened for the repetition of the *Amidah* in *N'ilah* and then it's kept open. And this idea of an open ark has, of course, resonances of the gates that are still open but about to close just as the ark is about to close, and it contributes to the drama of the moment. There are many of us who have our congregations invite them, those are able to physically, to stand for the entire service, to stand from the moment that the ark is opened for the *Amidah* to the very end.

Many of our congregations use *N'ilah* as an opportunity for everyone in the congregation to approach the ark, to come up on the bimah, either throughout the *N'ilah* service, or in my congregation we do it during a repetition of the *Sh'losh-Es-reih Midot* that we're singing again, and again, and again, to come before the ark and to offer their final prayer before the closing of the gates.

Dr. Levy taught us beautifully about the ending of the *Sh'ma* one time, *Baruch shem* three times,

How could highlighting these key verses alter the tone of your *N'ilah* worship and the conclusion of Yom Kippur? How else could you utilize highlighting to emphasize certain aspects of High Holy Day liturgy?

and *Adonai hu haElohim* seven times. Many of us have found that rather than those being sort of very prescribed musical pieces, that inviting people to call them out, to shout them out, can be a very powerful experience, to have a congregation of people calling out in loud voices, *Adonai hu haElohim! Adonai hu haElohim!*

Many congregations invite children to come up to the bimah toward the end of *N'ilah*—for our children, sometimes dressed in white, to have front-row seats to enter the New Year with us for the final blast of the shofar. There is, in many congregations, a breaking out in song and dance with those children on the bimah to *L'shanah Habaah BiY'rushalayim* following the final blast. We have *Havdalah*, and if there are children on the bimah, I found that glow sticks kind of enhance the power of that moment.

How do these customs enhance the High Holy Day worship experience?

I just want to end with two final, sort of off the *machzor* page things. One is the greeting that is probably not well known by most of our communities, but the traditional greeting at the end of Yom Kippur, *Tizku l'shanim rabot*, that is part of the final stanza of the *piyut El Nora Alilah*. And I love what it represents, that we've had a day where we've felt so close to death—we've dressed in white, we've abstained from the most human aspects of our lives, from eating, from washing, from sexual relations—and now, having come so close to death, what we do, the very first thing, is we wish one another a long life, *Tizku l'shanim rabot*. And finally, I wonder if we might reconsider two rituals that are traditionally done before breaking the fast: *Kiddush L'vanah*, blessing the new moon, and putting the first screws in the sukkah.

How might we understand this greeting with the societal debate over quality versus quantity of life in the background?

## N'ilah: Sources

### 1. Babylonian Talmud, *Rosh HaShanah* 17b

ויעבר ה' על פניו ויקרא, אמר רבי יוחנן: אלמלא מקרא כתוב אי אפשר לאומר, מלמד שנתעטף הקדוש ברוך הוא כשליח צבור, והראה לו למשה סדר תפלה. אמר לו: כל זמן שישראל חוטאין—יעשו לפני כסדר הזה, ואני מוחל להם. ה' ה'—אני הוא קודם שיחטא האדם, ואני הוא לאחר שיחטא האדם ויעשה תשובה.

"The Eternal passed in front of him and called . . ." (Exodus 34:6). Rabbi Yochanan said: Had the verse not been written, it would have been impossible to say [such a thing]—this teaches that the Almighty wrapped Himself in a tallit as a *sh'liach tzibur* and showed Moses the order of prayer. God said to him, "Any time Israel sins, let them perform this service before Me and I shall forgive them. *Adonai, Adonai*—I am the One before a person sins, and I am the One after a person sins and does *t'shuvah*. . . ."

### 2. *Mishkan HaNefesh* (Pilot Edition for Yom Kippur Evening)

In an astonishing midrash, the Talmudic sage Rabbi Yochanan imagined God majestically robed in tallit, teaching Moses the order of the prayers and saying to him: "Every time that Israel 'misses the mark,' let them read the Thirteen Attributes in My presence, and I will forgive them" (BT *Rosh HaShanah* 17b). This portrait of an intimate relationship with God—the Holy One wrapped in prayer shawl, showing Moses how to pray—conveys the spiritual promise of the Songs of Forgiveness. For this is the moment when the veil is lifted from our face; this is the moment when we are no longer hidden from our Maker. This is the precious moment of renewing the relationship.

### 3. Ezra Bick, *In His Mercy: Understanding the Thirteen Midot*

It is one thing for mortal beings to be the dwelling-place of God and the fountainhead of *kedusha* when they strive to serve God by accepting God's Torah and obeying God's laws. The sin of the golden calf logically destroys that dream. The same covenant must be recreated,

but in radically new circumstances. How can corruption be the basis of sanctity? The answer is found in the mystery of the Thirteen Attributes—that God is the one who is *nesiat cheyt*—who bears sin. History is completely different after sin because, amazingly, it continues.

#### 4. Excerpts from the *Vidui for N'ilah*

Short Confession (*Vidui Zuta*):

אשמנו, בגדנו, גזלנו, דברנו דופי. העוינו, והרשענו, זדנו, חמסנו, טפלנו שקר.  
 יעצנו רע, כזבנו, לצנו, מרדנו, נאצנו, סררנו, עוינו, פשענו, צרנו, קשינו עורף.  
 רשענו, שחתנו, תעבנו, תעתענו.  
 סרנו ממצותיך וממשפטיך הטובים ולא שוה לנו. ואתה צדיק על כל הבא עלינו,  
 כי אמת עשית ואנחנו הרשענו.

No Long Confession (*Vidui Rabbah*) for *N'ilah*. Instead the following appears:

**מה נאמר לפניך יושב מרום**, ומה נספר לפניך שוכן שחקים, הלא כל הנסתרות  
 והנגלות אתה יודע.

#### What can we say before You, You who dwell on high?

What can we declare before You, You who abide in heaven?

Do You not know all, the hidden the revealed alike?

**אתה נותן יד לפושעים, וימינך פשוטה לקבל שבים.**  
 ותלמדנו יי אלהינו להתודות לפניך על כל עונותינו, למען נחזל מעשק ידינו,  
 ותקבלנו בתשובה שלמה לפניך כאשים וכניחוחים, למען דבריך ובעבור אשר  
 אמרת. אין קץ לאשי חובותינו, ואין מספר לניחוחי אשמתנו; ואתה יודע שאחריתנו  
 רמה ותולעה, לפיכך הרבית סליחתנו. **מה אנו, מה חיינו, מה חסדנו, מה צדקנו,**  
**מה ישועתנו, מה כחנו, מה גבורתנו.** מה נאמר לפניך, יי אלהינו ואלהי אבותינו,  
 הלא כל הגבורים כאין לפניך, ואנשי השם כלא היו, וחכמים כבלי מדע,  
 ונבונים כבלי השכל, כי רוב מעשיהם תהו, וימי חייהם הבל לפניך; ומותר האדם  
 מן הבהמה אין, כי הכל הבל.

You extend Your hand to transgressors; Your right hand is outstretched to receive those who return, and You have taught us, Eternal our God, to confess before You all our iniquities, so that we may withdraw our hands from theft. . . .



## 5. Babylonian Talmud, Yoma 87b

מאי נעילת שערים? רב אמר: צלותא יתירתא, ושמואל אמר: מה אנו מה חיינו. מיתבי: אור יום הכפורים מתפלל שבע ומתודה, בשחרית מתפלל שבע ומתודה, במוסף מתפלל שבע ומתודה, במנחה מתפלל שבע ומתודה, בנעילה מתפלל שבע ומתודה—תנאי היא, דתניא: יום הכפורים עם חשיכה מתפלל שבע ומתודה וחותר בידוי, דברי רבי מאיר, וחכמים אומרים: מתפלל שבע, ואם רצה לחתום בידוי—חותם. תיובתא דשמואל תיובתא. עולא בר רב נחית קמיה דרבא, פתח באתה בחרתנו וסיים במה אנו מה חיינו ושבחה.

What is *N'ilat Sh'arim*? Rav says: It is an extra *Amidah* prayer (i.e., the same seven blessings recited during the other *Amidah* prayers of Yom Kippur). But Sh'muel says: It consists only of the prayer, "What are we? What are our lives. . . ." (i.e., it is not an *Amidah* prayer at all).

They challenged Sh'muel's view using the following *baraita*: On the night of Yom Kippur, one prays an *Amidah* consisting of seven blessings and confesses his sins. In *Shacharit*, one prays an *Amidah* consisting of seven blessings and confesses his sins. At *Musaf*, one prays an *Amidah* consisting of seven blessings and confesses his sins. At *Minchah*, one prays an *Amidah* consisting of seven blessings and confesses his sins. At *N'ilah*, one prays an *Amidah* consisting of seven blessings and confesses his sins, and he ends with a blessing about confession. This is the opinion of Rabbi Meir. But the Sages say: One prays an *Amidah* consisting of seven blessings and confesses his sins, and if he wants to end with a blessing about confession he may do so. This *baraita* represents a refutation of the view of Sh'muel. It is indeed a refutation.

Ulla the son of Rav went down to lead the prayers before Rava. He began the middle blessing of *N'ilah* with the words "You have chosen us . . ." and he ended that blessing with the words "What are we, what are our lives . . ." and Rav praised him (because he fulfilled the ruling of both Rav and Shmuel).

## 6. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik

Why is theft singled out with special emphasis in *Ne'ilah*? The reason is that theft actually covers every type of sin. With every sin a Jew commits, he or she forgoes their right to existence, as they violate the condition upon which their existence rests, thereby "stealing" from God. The

significance of God's name as Adonai, which is derived from the word Adon, or Master, is that God is Master and Owner of the world by virtue of being its creator. All of a person's organs, talents, and capabilities belong to God and are only on loan to human beings. The very moment they are misused, the human being has violated his or her agreement with God. Living a life of sin is an act of theft and distortion.