

AI Chet 2025 by Natasha Cooper-Benisty

The AI Chet Prayer is believed to have been composed by Yosi ben Yosi who was the very first known liturgical poet. Although scholars are not certain of when he lived, according to the National Library of Israel the current view is that he lived in the 4th or 5th century. The original composition of the AI Chet was very compact with only six lines of text featuring six general categories of sin. Saadiah Gaon's prayerbook in the 10th century had these same 6 lines which expanded to 12 lines in Amram Gaon's prayerbook in the 9th century and to 22 or 24 (different sources stated different numbers) in Maimonides' prayerbook in the 12th century. Today there are 44 lines in the Ashkenazic prayerbook, but don't start counting lines, since our reading will combine part of the traditional text with an alternative "New Confessional" which was written by Rabbi Gerald Weiss, revised and adapted by Nikki Pusin with input from Rabbi Lenny Levin and Eliana Kissner.

As part of my preparation, I began by comparing the AI Chet in three machzorim (the Harlow, the Lev Shalem and the traditional Koren Machzor) and I realized that the Harlow seems to rework some of the confessions (and I would imagine that there was spirited debate while putting together this part of the machzor) and that the section on page 580, which we are not reciting today and which Harlow says is in memory of the 6 million, is according to the Lev Shalem machzor notes, a more recent addition to the AI Chet by Rabbi Avraham Holtz who wrote a contemporary AI Chet focusing on the sins of the Jewish community in modern times in not reacting passionately to contemporary crises. As a sidenote I think it is interesting that the updated Conservative machzor, Lev Shalem, has returned to the traditional 44 lines, in addition to adding Rabbi Holtz's piece as an alternative confession. Apparently, the editors realized that cutting down our list of daily sins was a bit premature and those omitted needed to be reinstated! FYI, If you are wondering what might be different in the Orthodox listing, according to Rabbi Jeffrey Cohen's book "Prayer and Penitence a Commentary on the High Holy Day Machzor, it includes the addition of a shortish list of sins for which in Temple times would have necessitated bringing a specific type of offering to the Temple or would have attracted a harsh biblical or rabbinic penalty.

When the Al Chet was a mere 6 lines, it focused on sins committed forcibly, willingly, in error, brazenly, in secret and openly. According to the Babylonian Talmud, Yoma 86B to be specific, the sins listed should only be between one person and another. The sins listed in the Al Chet are not connected to the rituals of our faith since the Talmud identifies violations such as the desecration of Shabbat and festivals as sins between a person and God. Rather, they are a list of transgressions within our day to day lives. We say the Al Chet as a community which was originally a debate within the Talmud (should we confess individually or as a community), but ultimately the decision was made for the community to confess publicly together. In the text Moments of Transcendence: Inspirational Readings for Yom Kippur, Rabbi Dov Peretz Elkins explains that the reason for confessing together is a manifestation of the principal that all Jews are responsible for each other. If one Jew sins, its as if all Jews have sinned and this group confession reminds us that the shortcomings of one's particular society or community often results in the failure of the individual.

The Al Chet in it's complete form is a double alphabetical acrostic which itemizes the different types of sins we are confessing. The Lev Shalem Machzor states that although our list of sins will never be complete, by using the alef bet as a template we can express our intention to include everything that we are guilty of from A to Z. However, at the same time this communal confession doesn't relieve us of the obligation to confess our personal individual sins and we can also think about those sins that are especially prevalent in the world in which we live. As I conducted research for this piece I came across a paper by Rabbi Dalia Marx who wrote about the Al Chet in Israeli culture. Her paper starts with Hayim Nachman Bialik who as a 17 year old in Elul 1890 wrote a letter to his teachers and friends expressing his disappointment at finding himself at a prestigious Lithuanian yeshivah, which he had mistakenly thought would provide him with a modern Jewish education, yet was doing little beyond the traditional Talmudic study. He used the Al Chet prayer to write sentences like "for the sin my parents and teachers committed through demeaning me" which in essence was flipping the Al Chet to accuse his parents and teachers. Rabbi Marx found other examples of the Al Chet being used in recent years in Israel. She points out that Israelis use this traditional classic liturgical language even when they want to say something completely non-religious and even anti-religious. She includes

a confessional from Mekhon Shitim an archive and educational center of the kibbutz movement that includes lines like “for the sin we have committed through wasting natural resources” and “for the sin we have committed through dangerous driving”. There are political Al Chets from pre October 7th time which one could argue can be regarded differently in our current political climate and it was interesting to me that Rabbi Holtz’s piece, which as noted, is said in memory of the 6 million in the Harlow machzor, has several lines which resonate with the recent political realities in Israel of judicial reform and the fallout from the war (we have sinned against you by communal strife and we have sinned against you by despairing).

On a much lighter note, I enjoyed learning that each year before Yom Kippur the Israeli press publishes new and innovative confessions. One memorable piece was written by Ruvik Rosenthal a Tel Aviv journalist and language expert who wrote a “Linguistic Confession” which included such gems as “for the sin we have committed against you for destroying grammar” “for the sin we have committed against you through lazy pronunciation”! As a Hebrew speaker and teacher, this spoke to me (though I do try my best with Hebrew grammar!).

Returning to the traditional serious nature of the Al Chet prayer, as I conclude this drash, I want to leave you with the words of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel who wrote a Kavanah (or intention) for the Al Chet that we should ponder:

Embarrassment not only precedes religious commitment; it is the touchstone of religious existence...What the world needs is a sense of embarrassment...We are guilty of misunderstanding the meaning of existence; we are guilty of distorting our goals and misrepresenting our souls. We are better than our assertions, more intricate, more profound than our theories maintain... What is the truth of being human? The lack of pretension, the acknowledgement of opaqueness, shortsightedness, inadequacy. But truth also demands rising, striving for the goal is both within and beyond us. The truth of being human is gratitude; its secret is appreciation.