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Imagine the following scenario: You're at a funeral. It is, of course, a sad and solemn occasion. The officiant offers readings and prayers, and then family members – perhaps stoic and measured, perhaps teary-eyed and emotional – get up to offer remembrances. As the speakers finish and the ceremony is drawing to a close, a stranger suddenly stands up – someone unfamiliar to everyone in the room. The stranger pulls a piece of paper out of his pocket and starts to read. No one knows who he is or what he's doing there, but it quickly becomes apparent that he is delivering a message from the deceased, a message the deceased had commissioned the man to read at his funeral.

Puzzled? I would think so, but it's something that has been happening with increasing frequency lately, so much so that one man, Bill Edgar of Queensland, Australia has found himself making a career of it. It all started when he was working as a private investigator for a client named Graham who he later discovered was terminally ill. Graham asked if Bill would be willing to interrupt his funeral and, more specifically, interrupt when his best friend rose to speak. You see, Graham had witnessed this supposed best friend making advances on his wife over a period of time as Graham was getting increasingly sick and wasn't able to intervene. The wife had rebuffed him, but Graham was still understandably furious at the so-called friend's betrayal. And so he hired Bill to publicly interrupt and humiliate his friend while he was speaking, and deliver a post-mortem message on Graham's behalf excoriating him. Bill was apprehensive at the thought of interrupting at a funeral, but he agreed to do it; and someone attending the funeral approached him afterward about interrupting at another funeral, which led to more referrals and more requests and ultimately to a very lucrative business called Coffin Confessor where people can hire Bill to share their very literal last words for the bargain price of \$10,000 a pop.

Now while Graham hired Bill to expose his treacherous friend's underhanded behavior, most of the messages Bill was eventually hired to share were, in fact, confessions – secrets the deceased person desperately wanted to reveal but felt unable to do so while he or she was still alive. For example there was the older woman who was privately in love with her longtime friend Carol. There was the man who was having an affair with his wife's sister. The businessman who admitted to having embezzled from his company for many years. All of these revelations were no doubt shocking and often distressing for the people attending the funeral. But most of the people who hired Bill weren't necessarily trying to cause hurt or distress to those left behind, rather they were doing it because they were weighed down by something that they desperately needed to share and couldn't figure out how to do it while they were still alive, hence the name Coffin Confessor.

Now I want to go on the record as someone who has been to far more than his share of funerals that I do *not* support this kind of dramatic, staged post-mortem confession where someone who is no longer alive essentially lobs bombs and leaves everyone else to pick up the pieces: *please do not do this*. But the fact remains that the people who hire Bill feel a desperate need to unburden themselves of a secret that has been festering inside them – so much so that they are willing to hire someone to reveal it on their behalf.

And the fact is, secrets are corrosive. A recent study through Columbia Business School linked keeping secrets to lower well-being, worse health, and less satisfying relationships. When people keep secrets – and the study showed that the average adult is keeping *thirteen* secrets at any given moment – their stress levels increase. And not primarily for the obvious reason that they're scared they might slip up and reveal something, but rather because when someone has a secret he or she tends to dwell on it, ruminate on it like a sore tooth they can't stop thinking about. It's exhausting. And keeping secrets can make us feel isolated and cut off, holding something inside of us we don't want anyone to know about.

Well, I wouldn't exactly say *anyone*. One phenomenon I think many of us are aware of is sharing our deepest secrets with complete strangers – someone we meet in a bar, someone we're sitting next to on a plane. Holding a secret is so difficult and toxic that we are constantly tempted to unburden ourselves; and ironically a complete stranger often feels like a safer person in whom to confide than someone with whom we're already connected, who knows who we are. I remember a number of years ago visiting an exhibit in a Baltimore museum called 'PostSecret' – it was an initiative that invited people to anonymously share their deepest secrets by writing them on postcards that were then publicly displayed. The exhibit has traveled around the country and it is both searing and bracing to read some of the secrets that people feel compelled to share, from minor and banal to truly heart-wrenching. Most significantly, every time the exhibit shows up in a new location it prompts a whole flurry of new cards – when it was posted in San Diego's Museum of Man in 2018, the museum started receiving 500-1000 new postcards a day, a reflection of how badly people want to unburden themselves of secrets that they have been carrying.

Judaism recognizes the value of confession, of acknowledging things we have done wrong, which we regret and for which, perhaps, we are ashamed. In a few minutes we'll be entering the *vidui* section of our service, the ritualized confession with *Ashamnu* and *al chet she-chatanu*: for the sins we have committed. Although these prayers involve formalized recitations, the hope is that the act of confessing will open up new channels for us to connect with the deepest wrongs that we need to acknowledge and confront. The great medieval Jewish philosopher Maimonides holds that confession is repentance made concrete. He writes in his great compendium the *Mishneh Torah*: "With regard to all the precepts of the Torah, both affirmative and negative, if a person transgresses any one of them, either willfully or in error, when he repents and turns away from his sin, he is under a duty to confess before God, as it is said, [in the Book of Numbers] 'When a man or woman shall commit any sin that people commit...they shall confess their sin which they have done.'"

It's worth noting that this sort of sincere and private confession before God and the people we've wronged is in marked contrast to the recent development in our society of a confession culture in which people publicly share things (generally on Instagram or other social media platforms) for which they nominally feel ashamed, but which are actually designed to highlight how self-aware and virtuous the speaker is – a sort of performative humble-brag about, say, still having too big a carbon footprint or being inspired by people who are less fortunate than we are. *Awesome*. In fact, I think Bill Edgar and his Coffin Confessor are an outgrowth of the same phenomenon – the desire to make a splash, have a dramatic reveal, but do so in a way that has no consequences for the instigator, no fallout to confront since the person is now, after all, dead. And while there may be something cathartic for the person who is hiring Bill to

reveal a deep, dark secret at their funeral, all they are doing is causing pain and consternation to the people who hear it but have no way to process or come to terms with it and the person who never acknowledged it during his or her lifetime.

The people who hire Bill – and there are a lot of them – are obviously motivated to take this drastic step to unburden themselves because the knowledge of their upcoming passing – the ultimate deadline, so to speak – spurs the desire to act. Judaism also recognizes the urgency that the fear of death can create. This evening, this entire day, is designed to bring us face to face with our death, to confront the disconcerting but undeniable reality that we are all mortal. We fast and abstain from bodily pleasures, some of us dress in white which is the Jewish color of death, we recite prayers like the Unetaneh Tokef that are designed to remind us of the uncertainty of the future – who will live and who will die, who in the fullness of years and whose life will be cut short. And this awareness – one which we spend much of the rest of the year trying to ignore or keep at bay – ideally awakens the impulse for sincere confession within us: the acknowledgement of the many places we have done wrong and the genuine desire to atone and to change our ways.

And here is where I find the Coffin Confessor stories so depressing. The purpose of confession, properly done, is to confront the wrongs we have committed and strive to do better. But for someone who is dead there is no ‘doing better,’ no path to change and growth for which the confession clears the ground. Yom Kippur confronts us with death in the midst of our life in the service of spurring teshuvah – repentance and change. The liturgy reminds us of our mortality not to bring us low, but rather to urge us to get our houses in order sooner rather than later because the length of time we have on earth is not guaranteed. Confronting us with our mortality is actually intended to be empowering, inviting us to seize the opportunities this awareness opens up and giving us courage to do whatever needs to be done, to repair our relationships and better ourselves.

Being conscious of our own ultimate finitude is intended to remind us how precious the relationships are that we have in our life, and the way that we cannot abuse them or take them for granted. There may be a temptation to keep secrets out of a self-serving belief that doing so will make the relationship stronger – that revealing whatever the secret is will cause a rift that can’t be repaired and that ‘what they don’t know can’t hurt ’em’. But secrets have a way of ultimately taking on their own corrosive weight and reality, of getting between people and preventing them from being fully honest and present with each other, which creates its own damage however much we might wish it weren’t so. The purpose of confession is to begin to address that damage – because even though we might think of Yom Kippur as a solemn, perhaps even depressing holiday, it is one that is ultimately hopeful: that secrets can be revealed, that damage can be repaired, that transgressions can be forgiven.

I don’t want to understate the fraught nature of this day: secrets are powerful and confessing them is hard. It’s hard to be upfront with other people, we can feel ashamed; and it’s virtually impossible if we aren’t first honest with ourselves. So this might be a first step: an exercise. If you were going to hire Bill Edgar to share a confession at your funeral, what would it be? Seriously: take a moment to think, just to yourself, what it is you would hire him to say?

What is the secret or secrets you need to unburden yourself of? How would it feel having that secret out in the open? How does it feel even to acknowledge it to yourself? What’s scary about that, but also what opportunities would revealing that secret create? Would it enable

you to make a change, do the critical work of honest repair, building a sturdier and more truthful path forward? How can being honest with ourselves about our secrets make it easier to consider getting rid of them?

Because it's important to remember: as much as Yom Kippur is a day of turning toward God, it is also, supremely, a day of turning toward each other. On Yom Kippur we acknowledge our shortcomings and we try to reach out to those we have harmed to admit and apologize, to confess and to ask for forgiveness. While we undertake the work of Yom Kippur individually – work that no one else can do on our behalf – that work is ultimately about relationship: with those around us, with God, and with ourselves. We come together this evening to strip away the artifice and the pretense and stand honest and open and vulnerable, in all our flawed, imperfect humanity. It's a challenge and it's a gift; and if we do it right we can free ourselves from the sorrows, fears, and regrets that keep Bill Edgar in business. We don't need a Coffin Confessor: Yom Kippur gives us the opportunity, right here, right now to unlock the secrets we bury in ourselves and start the sacred work of confession, repentance, and repair. *Ken yehi ratzon*, may it be God's will.