

# Spinning, Turning, and Reckoning

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Ever since arriving in this country six years ago, I've been so fascinated by Australia's Apology to the Stolen Generations. Perhaps this is because I come from a country that's always so insufferably proud of itself. I've always known that one day, I'd speak about the Apology in a Yom Kippur sermon, because I imagined that in "Apology" writ large, on a national scale, there might be lessons for us *as individuals*—insights that could be applied to our own *personal* efforts to ask forgiveness, for things we've done wrong in our *own* lives. Perhaps insights gleaned from a societal *teshuvah* could assist with individual *teshuvah*—repentance.

I realise, of course, that Australia's Apology wasn't perfect and it didn't come easily: that not every individual citizen was on board with it, and that others feel saying "sorry" doesn't go far enough—that words and confessions are empty without closing the gap in health, education, and opportunity. Nevertheless, the Apology *does* reflect a *reckoning*—an accounting of the country's soul, if not its financial obligation. A reckoning requires self-reflection, courage, and imagination—self-examination and coming to terms with the darker chapters in our history, not just resting in the myths we've come to believe about ourselves. It takes a special people to be able to do this, and I admire you for it.

My native country apologises every once in a while, but not very often. In fact, sometimes American national apologies are embarrassingly slow in coming. It took us almost a century-and-a-half to issue an apology for *two-and-a-half* centuries of brutal slavery. Why did it take us so long? Because of three "R"s: first, the prospect of Reparations and our reluctance to be held accountable for them; second, continued Racial discrimination, which emerged in other forms after slavery ended. And the third reason apology took so long? Reckoning—the painful process of recognising the damage we caused, retelling a truer story about ourselves, and imagining a new way forward. This third "R" is the hardest part of repentance, whether national or personal. It's why apologies don't come easily, and why some apologies never come at all.

Why is reckoning so difficult? Because both individuals and nations have stories we tell about ourselves, to which we grow profoundly attached. America's story it likes to tell, is that it is the greatest democracy, a democratiser, and leader of the free world. This story is told by its national anthem, proclaiming America "the land of the free," by its national symbol the Statue *of Liberty*, and in countless other ways. And yet, writes author Ta-Nehisi Coates, "for *African-Americans*, unfreedom is the historical norm." Coates, who recently spoke in Sydney, believes that America's decades-long resistance

to even *studying* the effects of slavery, much less apologising for them, speaks to something beyond fear of financial obligation; it speaks to the fear of *reckoning*. He says, to entertain the *possibility* that reparations might be due would mean “a deep reconsideration of America’s own autobiography... It would be acknowledging that their most cherished myth was not real.... *Black* history does not flatter American democracy... it chastens it.”<sup>i</sup>

How does Aboriginal history chasten the Lucky Country? What is the cherished myth that made the Australian Apology difficult to utter? Why was it preceded by a “Great Australian Silence”?<sup>ii</sup> Did Keating’s Redfern speech recognising a history of dispossession contradict treasured aspects of Australian identity? The egalitarian notion of “a fair go”? Or “mateship”? What is the story Australia loves to tell about itself, and how does the *Aboriginal* story disrupt that self-understanding? Here’s the challenge that national and personal apologies have in common: Apologies mean that not only might we owe something to someone we’ve hurt; they mean the end of our “spin”—the stories we tell about ourselves and like to perpetuate, which build up our self-esteem and flatter us.

Today is not a day about *national* apologies. But it is a day of reckoning. It’s a day for each *individual* to halt the spin we’ve been putting on the story of our own life, which builds us up and flatters us. What are the cherished myths we tell about *ourselves*? Today is a day to entertain the *thought* that maybe—just *maybe*—not everyone in our lives sees us the way we see ourselves—that someone else’s story may chasten ours; it’s a day to study the effects of our behaviour, and possible remedies, even if that means our self-understanding might change. None of us has individually committed offenses the magnitude of an entire country’s. But each of us has a *personal* reckoning to do on this day—recognising the damage we’ve caused another person or loved one, retelling a truer, more complete story about ourselves, and imagining a new way forward.

For the Jewish people, this process of reckoning begins with *vidui*—the Hebrew word often translated as “confession.” The machzor provides us a remarkably on-point script in its “alphabet of woe”: *ashamnu, bagadnu, gazalnu, dibarnu dofi*—“We confess these human sins—arrogance, bigotry, cynicism, deceit and egotism, flattery and greed...”<sup>iii</sup> The failings we confess in the *vidui* are the same ones we use to spin our life story in ways that flatter us and build our esteem, blinding us to how others might read the same story. Arrogance and egotism keep me from imagining that I might ever do anything wrong, and if you think I did, well, the problem *must* be *you*, not me. Deceit shows in what I post on Facebook—not because what it says about my life is untrue, but because of the truths it *leaves out*. Apologizing is difficult because we have to admit not only that our actions weren’t right, but that our *story* wasn’t right! And this is a lot to ask of a person. The traits listed in the *vidui* are what build our self-understanding into

one of self-magnificence; confessing these traits as sins brings us back to who we really are.

*Vidui*, however, is more than just a confession. To fully understand this act that we are meant to undertake on Yom Kippur, we need to consider the origin of the word, which, it turns out, has much to do with our own origins. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks takes special interest in the fact that the word *vidui* shares a shoresh—a Hebrew root—with the name *Yehudah*, or Judah. Judah was one of Jacob’s twelve sons, and the instigator of a plot to “kill off” his younger brother Joseph by selling him into slavery. In the words of Rabbi Sacks, “Judah is the last person from whom we expect great things.” And yet, as the Torah narrative unfolds, Judah turns his story around. When faced with a similar situation in his later years, he goes to great lengths to keep his other brother, Benjamin, from being enslaved, offering *himself* as a slave instead. Rabbi Sacks calls this “a highly significant moment in the history of the human spirit.”<sup>iv</sup> Judah is the first to demonstrate for us the meaning of *teshuvah*—true repentance.

How did Judah’s repentance come about? When did Judah change? Rabbi Sacks points to an episode a few chapters earlier that was Judah’s spiritual turning point. Judah had three sons. One married a woman named Tamar. When the son died, Judah gave Tamar his second son in marriage, as was the custom of the time. But when that son also died, Judah refused to give his third son to Tamar, defying the rules of society and leaving her destitute. So Tamar disguises herself as a prostitute, has an encounter with Judah in which she keeps his signs of royalty—his staff, seal, and cord—and prepares to “out” him as the father of her child in front of the whole community, at what becomes a pivotal moment. It’s a moment of reckoning. In that moment, Judah admits he’s behaved wrongly, declaring: “She is more right than I, as I did not give her to my son.”<sup>v</sup> Tamar’s story doesn’t flatter Judah, it chastens him. No longer able to spin the events of his life to uphold his story and image, Judah acknowledges that Tamar’s story of him is truer than his own.

Judah’s acknowledgement—his admission—sheds light on the deeper meaning of *vidui*. Rabbi Sacks writes: “The biblical term *vidui*, ‘confession...’ comes from the same root [as his name, *Yehudah*]. Judah means ‘he who acknowledged.’”<sup>vi</sup> To recite the *vidui* is to acknowledge, as Judah did, that other people’s stories may contain truths that ours don’t. Their story may complete our own. *Vidui* is a moment of reckoning, when we admit who we really are, without the spin. Once we’ve done this—and let go of the story we thought defined us—it’s not such a big step to offer apology. Apology won’t undermine our self-image, if we’ve already recognised the inaccuracy or incompleteness of that image. *Vidui* is the moment of reckoning that makes apology possible.

Reckoning isn’t easy—for people or for nations. Letting go of one myth to which we’ve grown attached is spiritually disruptive. Reparations may be costly, but loss of identity? *Agony*. So it’s worth noting that the story of Judah’s life doesn’t end with

Tamar and his moment of reckoning. From that point on, his story takes a turn for the better. The Torah goes on to tell us of his willingness to sacrifice his freedom so that Benjamin could go free. Judah receives a beautiful blessing from his father Jacob, as Jacob lay dying. We're told that King David came from the tribe of Judah, and that so will Mashiach—the Messiah. The land of Judea takes its name from his, and so, in fact, do we, the Jewish people—*Yehudim*. There is something of Judah in each of us: not only the capacity for *vidui* and our willingness each year on *this* day to deconstruct the myth of who we are, but also the ability to imagine and write for ourselves a new and redemptive story. Moments of reckoning are about *this* too: telling a truer story of ourselves *and* imagining a new way forward. Beginning to write for ourselves a new story, each year based on a fuller picture of who we are—that's what it is to be *Yehudim*—to be Jews.

When the Apology for slavery was finally issued by the United States Senate in 2009, one senator commented: "It doesn't fix everything, but it does go a long way toward *acknowledgment* and moving us on to the next steps to building a *more perfect* union."<sup>vii</sup> The Australian reckoning, articulated at Redfern, spoke of "the deepening of Australian social democracy"<sup>viii</sup> that would result from inclusion of indigenous peoples, and the Apology that followed described a beautiful future "where all Australians, whatever their origins, are truly equal partners, with equal opportunities and with an equal stake in shaping the next chapter in the history of this great country..." "For the future we take heart," said the Prime Minister, "resolving that this new page in the history of our great continent can now be written."<sup>ix</sup> Like Judah, they're saying: we can turn our story around, and begin to write an even better one. What's true for nations can be true for individuals. Reckoning teaches us who we really are, *and* who we might become. *Vidui* is that moment of reckoning which paves the way for apology and makes it possible to write a new story, just as our namesake did in ancient days. On this Yom Kippur—our annual day of reckoning—may Judah's blessing be ours.

*G'mar chatimah tovah.*

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<sup>i</sup> Ta-Nehisi Coates, *We Were Eight Years in Power*, New York: One World, 2017.

<sup>ii</sup> <https://theconversation.com/friday-essay-the-great-australian-silence-50-years-on-100737>

<sup>iii</sup> *Gates of Repentance* machzor

<sup>iv</sup> <http://www.aish.com/tp/i/sacks/183700211.html>

<sup>v</sup> Gen. 38:26

<sup>vi</sup> <http://www.aish.com/tp/i/sacks/183700211.html>

<sup>vii</sup> <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/06/18/AR2009061803877.html?noredirect=on>

<sup>viii</sup> [https://antar.org.au/sites/default/files/paul\\_keating\\_speech\\_transcript.pdf](https://antar.org.au/sites/default/files/paul_keating_speech_transcript.pdf)

<sup>ix</sup> <https://www.australia.gov.au/about-australia/our-country/our-people/apology-to-australias-indigenous-peoples>