HILKHOT TESHUBA 1:1: to be or not to be specific?

Maimonides explains that the commandment of Teshuba is fulfilled when we recite the Viduy. Viduy is the verbal confession of our transgressions, while feeling regret and shame for the wrong things we have done.

The Viduy/confession is done privately. We do not disclose our sins in front of other people or a minister, but only in front of God. Whispering the confession to ourselves.

There is a discussion in the Talmud (Rabbi Yehuda ben Baba vs. Rabbi Aqiba) if one needs to specify his or her wrongdoings or one can just state in general terms that he has acted wrongly. It is similar to the situation we would face when we want to apologize to someone we have offended: should we apologize mentioning the specifics of our wrongdoing or should we just say a general “I’m sorry for what I have done to you “?

According to the Shulhan Arukh it is not necessary to mention every specific sin that one has committed. This leniency aims specifically at not discouraging a person who wants to repent. Since he might not be capable –or courageous enough– to recalling the particulars of his wrong behavior. A general confession facilitates the process of Teshuba.

Maimonides, however, rules like the first opinion and indicates that one should mention in his private confession everything wrong he has done. Teshuba 1:1, “and then one shall confess, I have done so and so…”.

If we wish to follow Maimonides opinion we need to apply ourselves to a deep process of introspection. Exercising our memory and struggling against our impulses of denial and self advocacy. While reviewing our past actions it might help to write down all misdeeds we can remember. Including obviously, unpaid debts and apologies we owe to our peers.

In the context of Maimonides opinion the text of the Viduy –the one we say for Selihot, for example– should be seen as a reminder of the points we should recall, repent for, and hopefully correct.

This challenging spiritual/ethical/intellectual activity cannot be done overnight. We dedicate to it forty days, from the beginning of Elul until Yom Kippur: the day we devote ourselves entirely and exclusively to the exercise of Teshuba/Viduy.