

YOM KIPPUR 2017/5778 PLEADING GUILTY

By this time of the day it can feel like you're running out of sins to confess. At the other extreme, you might be overwhelmed to keep getting reminded of things you've done wrong? You could end up feeling guilty that you don't feel guilty enough. Or else guilty that you are feeling too guilty. Guilt is not a pleasant emotion. You could define it as self-blame, self-directed anger; anxiety mixed in sometimes; sadness.

Spinoza defined remorse (his synonym for guilt) in a very neutral way: 'Remorse is sorrow with the accompanying idea of something past which unhopd for, has happened.' Following Spinoza's line of thought the way to deal with it would be to detach yourself, and instead of beating yourself up, analyse dispassionately what went wrong, what you believe and feel about it. Freud, at the beginning of the 20th century revolutionized our thinking by introducing in-depth analysis of what the root causes of our guilt feelings might be; to make the unconscious conscious. Neither Spinoza nor Freud would have approved of the way we do it in Shul, of which they both had plenty of experience.

How do we do it? And how good is what we do? The simplest answer is that if it works for you – no-one can dispute that! I propose that we can learn at least four important lessons from the way guilt is dealt with in the Yom Kippur confessions.

1. It's all public. It's collective responsibility. The central confessional passages are Al Chet and Ashamnu.
2. In both, the tradition on each of the key phrases is to beat your breast ever so lightly. You are not to overdo it – that's the 2nd lesson. There was the story of the Shamas who was passing through the Ladies Gallery spraying the air with Eau de Cologne, and he noticed a lady banging her stomach. Excuse me he said – 'you do it up here'. Listen Mr, she said: I know where I've sinned.
3. There has to be a limit to confessions of guilt. This is the 3rd lesson. You could go on *ad infinitum*. We don't. Why not? I think because guilt can be an inhibitor to action. The worse you feel about it the less you do about it. And it can even become an excuse.
4. Looking at the first word Ashamnu lesson number 4 occurred to me. Asham means Guilt. Ashamnu – 'we are guilty'. Or else, let me be bold enough to suggest, that Ashamnu is included with the other words as a sin in itself. It can be a sin to feel guilty!

Freud wouldn't have liked that 2nd order guilt at all. Guilt is there – from early childhood. We deal with it by means of defences: Projection – on to others – it's not us but others that are at fault, especially the one that criticizes us. Displacement, take it out on somebody else altogether, shooting the messenger – it's the fault of the people who informed on us: the press, the media: they generate fake news... And there's the defence of Rationalisation: always finding good reasons to dispel the guilt. (Those are some of the ways in which we defend ourselves against feeling too bad about things). Ashamnu, at the core of YK, is a collective taking of responsibility.

There are many types of guilt. Let me give five examples:

1. **guilt over what we have done or failed to do.** Harm or damage you and I have caused. Breaking your word. I said I wouldn't do it; I did it. (That's like a Kol Nidrei one).
2. **guilt over bad thoughts blocking you.** Thoughts about others or yourself. Cravings – especially for what you can't have, and feeling guilty. Starting the morning of YK off surrounded by community is supposed to diminish preoccupation with yourself.
3. **guilt over what you think you did,** but may be quite mistaken about. This is very common and is a good example of where Ashamnu, itself is misguided. I associate this with Musaph. Musaph means Additional service. You could say that- as if we don't have enough real misdeeds we have to invent some additional ones. We start Musaph by acknowledging all that happens in life and how we are all destined to endure the successes and failures of life. And it seems to imply that the successes and failures come because of the things we do or don't do. But not necessarily. And it culminates in the line: Repentance (Teshuvah) and Prayer (Tefillah) and charity (Tzedakah) are the solution: Orthodox translate it: 'they remove the evil decree', Reform interpret it: 'they transform the harshness in our destiny'. We may not be able to change events but we can change how we are disposed towards them.
4. **guilt about ourselves in relation to others.** Here I'm thinking about the services we've just been through. The so-called martyrs at the end of the Musaph and the Yizkor the Memorial Service. I'm sure you know something about **Survivor Guilt**. The feeling of 'why should I have survived in place of others far worthier than me?' 'Why have I lived longer than them?' Or 'why am I healthy when they aren't?' Or 'why should I do so well at school, Uni or work or sport when my siblings or friends aren't and can't?' YK reminds us that we are a collective. That what one person achieves can become the success of all. And conversely where one person fails can be seen as the responsibility of all to speak out against, or to help put right.
5. **guilt that you didn't do enough to help.** Perhaps you have someone very ill or a carer. You did something, but not enough. And now it may be too late. Professional helpers especially suffer from this one but anyone can, and particularly when you are bereaved. And in so many of those cases I find that a realization that no matter how much you did, it would not be enough for you because your love for that person knows no limits. Here's where this 5th and final service of Yom Kippur kicks in. It's not too late. It's never too late. We have an opportunity to overcome our personal limitations through our togetherness as a community.

What we can't do personally we can do in partnership, in teamwork, in community. I have not mentioned the Redevelopment for once this year. Can you guess why? Not because I don't believe it will happen. But I've learned to be careful about when! What is different about this YK, these Yamim Noraim is that we now have a team of two rabbis. That for me makes these High Holydays the Highest of the High (I'm on a real high). What Rabbi Robyn and I want to say to you is help us help you help all of us. In every way. Let's put

behind us our limitations in numbers – we are strong in spirit. Let's avoid comparing ourselves with other congregations or individuals whether Reform or Orthodox, that smacks of the Guilt of not being able to do enough. Or comparing ourselves with parents or other friends or family. That's another defense mechanism called Idealization – we will never be good enough by that standard; an excuse for doing nothing. Let's overcome the temptation to brand ourselves 'irreligious' or run ourselves down – or dampen down our enthusiasm out of a guilty feeling of appearing to do better than others.

I have been enjoying playing with the words Atonement and Attunement. Atonement – literally At-one-ment, the community way of absolving ourselves of Guilt. Attunement – being in tune with each other; empathy, being on each other's wavelength. When we sing Ashamnu, you may have noticed that in spite of all the guilty things we are confessing we sing it to an uplifting happy melody. Together as a team we can go from Attunement to Atonement to Attainment. And that is about the future and the present, whereas the guilt is about the past. I wish you well over the past.

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