

Together for the Holidays: You, Me, Us, and God

Kol Nidre 5775

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They say that Eskimos have more than thirty words that mean “snow.” As far as I know, *sheleg* is the only way to say “snow” in Hebrew, but there does seem to be one concept as common to Jews as snow is to Eskimos. Hebrew has innumerable words that mean “guilt.”

Tonight, as we confessed our sins, we repeatedly list them in alphabetical order, from *alef* to *taf*, from a to z, from “arrogance” to “zeal for bad causes.” If we take our High Holy Day worship seriously, we may quickly come to the conclusion that the prayers are designed to make us feel like rather wanton sinners. Perhaps those stereotyped jokes about Jewish parents and guilt are actually based on the very roots of our religion. Our prayer book may even prompt us to confess sins that we have not committed. For example, I may well have been rancorous from time to time in the last year, but few people who know me would accuse me of weakness of will, also on that alphabetical list.

The usual rabbinic answer is to point out that all the confessional prayers are stated in the first person plural: “For the sins we have committed,” not, “For the sins I have committed.” If I am not guilty, my fellow congregant may be, and I have a communal responsibility to confess the transgressions of everyone around me. Our tradition goes even further, suggesting that, while only some of us have sinned, we are all guilty.

This concept may be troubling to us, and it certainly is to Harvey Cox, America’s leading Protestant theologian and a Harvard University Professor. Somewhat late in life, Professor Cox married a Jewish woman, and they have a Jewish son together. While remaining a devout Christian, Professor Cox has actively practiced Judaism with his family for decades. In fact, the fidelity with which this prominent Protestant observes Shabbat and Jewish festivals would put many Jews to shame!

Professor Cox’s experiences with Judaism led him to write *Common Prayers: Faith, Family and a Christian’s Journey through the Jewish Year*. Most often, the theologian is highly complimentary of Judaism. He believes that Christians have much to learn from us. On the other hand, this guilt thing bothers Dr. Cox. Fasting on Yom Kippur, with all the other worshipers at his family’s synagogue, he was troubled. The communal confession of a number of sins he did not commit, and even for accidental transgressions, was so distasteful to him that he “was almost ready to sneak across the street for that grilled cheese sandwich and forgo any further confessing.”

On one level, Professor Cox’s discomfort points to a key difference between Judaism and Christianity. Both of our faiths emphasize the individual’s relationship with God, and are also concerned with the way that the entire community lives in covenant. For Christianity, though, the individual experience is primary. The Christian concept of salvation, for example, centers around eternal life after each person’s death. In Judaism, on the other hand, we understand that personal salvation is inextricably bound to the redemption of all God’s creation. Jews find the greatest significance in working to build a better tomorrow, in covenant with God, the Jewish people, and all humanity. When one person sins, then, I am affected, perhaps even guilty, for that transgression may derail our collective efforts to bring a more perfect future.

Ultimately, Professor Cox comes to some understanding of Jews’ collective guilt. He remains critical of us, though, because we seem to be stubbornly fixated on a lonely quest for forgiveness. Even if we are comfortable confessing the sins of others, ever ready to declare ourselves guilty, we profess that each of us must repent, quite individually, for our own sins.

Professor Cox has us there. The message has been hammered home, from our earliest Religious School days, in one sermon after another, and in our High Holy Day liturgy: In order to be forgiven, I must confess my sins. I am obligated to seek forgiveness from those whom I have hurt. I am required to change my ways. I am charged to offer penitential gifts of *tzedakah*. I am expected to pray for my own soul's cleansing. While we share the sins of others, we seem not to receive, or to give, any assistance in the process of repentance.

Such a lonely journey to forgiveness was not always the Jewish way. In fact, when our ancestors required atonement, they would bring a sacrifice to the Temple. The blood of the animal, slain in the sacred ritual, would wipe away their sins. To be sure, the penitent Jew had to recite the appropriate words, and was required to provide the animal for the sacrifice, so the individual did have some role in that process, but the Priest did most of the work, and the poor animal paid the ultimate price. The ancient Israelite was the beneficiary of what might be called "vicarious atonement," forgiveness through the sacrifice from the flocks or the herds.

Christianity adopted this idea of vicarious atonement, with the faith that Jesus' blood, shed on the cross, atones for the sins of others. Perhaps because Jews so forcefully disassociate ourselves from that specific Christian claim, we have shied away from any notion that anyone or anything other than ourselves can help return us to the good graces of our God.

And yet, ten days ago, our Rosh Hashanah prayers did declare that we may find forgiveness in the righteousness of others. One portion of our shofar service is called *zichronot*, or remembrances. We ask God to hear the blasts and remember the righteousness of our ancestors, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob, Leah and Rachel. If we do not deserve atonement on these High Holy Days, we beg God to forgive us on account of their merit.

More personally, each of us recalls loved ones, now gone from this world, who had wonderful traits that we wish we possessed. Perhaps *Gates of Prayer* put this sentiment best: "May the nobility in their lives and the high ideals they cherished endure in our thoughts and live on in our deeds." Our beloved dead can truly live, if we will carry the goodness of their lives into our own. Perhaps, too, when we fall short, God will recall our loved ones' goodness, and forgive us on their account.

Blessedly, our partners in repentance may include the people who continue to share our lives every day. Judaism teaches us the value of the *tochecha*, the loving rebuke, delivered in the right spirit, in the right time, in the right place. Nothing makes me a better person than a caring critique from my wife. Nothing makes me a better father than seeing the disappointment on the face of my sons, when I have missed the mark. Nothing makes me a better Rabbi than the sensitive reproof of a cherished Temple leader or staff colleague. Even if we recoil from the rebuke upon first hearing it, we can learn, and become better people, in the process. Living in covenant calls upon us to help each other to abandon our unholy paths.

Looking around the Sanctuary tonight, each of us can see men and women who possess traits we wish we could see in ourselves. Certainly, we must distinguish our unhealthy envy from our laudable desire to emulate the goodness in the people we admire, and we must guard against holding ourselves to standards we cannot realistically meet. For example, Josh may never offer as much time to community service as Max, but Josh may be moved by Max's example and take on one new activity to aid the needy. Sheila may never observe the rituals of Judaism as faithfully as Noreen, but Sheila may be encouraged by Noreen's piety to begin worshiping more regularly herself. I will never achieve Stuart's level of equanimity, but I may be inspired by his forbearance and better calm my soul. And, with faith, I

affirm: Max's service helps Josh to achieve forgiveness; Noreen's religiosity repents for Sheila; God forgives a measure of my worry on account of Stuart's serenity.

If only our prayer book would offer us a communal confession of the good we have done, sharing in the reward for the benevolent acts of others in our community, even as we join in guilt for the sins of our fellow congregants. Rabbi Paul Levenson creatively imagines how such a prayer might sound:

Al tov she-asanu l'fanecha:

For the good that we have done in our world, whether by our own free will or because we were shamed or forced to do it,

For the good we have done that we were unaware we had done,

And for the good we have done with kind and comforting words.

For the good that we have done both in public and in private,

For the good we have done by using gentle words,

And for the good we have done by helping other people.

For the good we have done by sticking to principle when our integrity demands it of us,

For the good we do when we are quick to fulfill mitzvot,

And for the good we do by random acts of love and kindness.

For all these good deeds that we do, O God of goodness, encourage us, support our efforts, and help us to do even better.

On this Yom Kippur, let us find strength in the faith that we are not alone. The righteousness of our ancestors intercedes with God on our behalf. The loving rebukes of our friends and family can lead us to repentance. Let us share in the goodness of the people around us. And may we know that God is our Partner in the process of building a better future.

Some years ago, in an interfaith dialogue about sin, I had talked a great deal about the individual's responsibility to repent, and was really feeling rather smug about our Jewish requirements in that regard. Just then, an Episcopalian lay person rose to share his faith. "Rabbi," he said, "I understand that, when I have gone astray, I must mend my ways, but I don't think that's my responsibility alone. I pray that God will reach into my heart, to help me rid myself of sin, to become a better person. Do you really believe that repentance is entirely up to you?"

I learned a great deal from that Episcopalian, a teaching that was integral to our own Jewish faith all along. Whenever we place the Torah back into the Ark, we sing: *Hashiveinu Adonai elecha v'nashuva*. "Cause us to turn to You, O God, and then we shall return in true repentance."

May we reach into each other's hearts, and may we open our souls to You, O God. Fill each of us with the faith that we are all together for the holidays.

Amen.