

Ashamnu: Collective Guilt and Personal Commitment

Yom Kippur Eve 5781

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The liturgy of the High Holidays weighs heavily on us today. “Who Shall Live and Who Shall Die” certainly carries a different presence in the Fall of 2020, as our nation closes in on 200,000 deaths from COVID-19. When we list our sins in the confessional of the Yom Kippur prayers tonight and tomorrow, we cannot help but wonder if our punishment exceeds our crime. Do we personally deserve the reign of plague, the economic devastation, the wildfires, the social unrest we are experiencing? What did I do wrong? Something seems not right.

Of course, there is wisdom in our liturgy born of our ancient Jewish experience. We have known suffering and we have known reward. We have flourished and we have been famished. Our prayers reflect it all.

Among the great wisdom of our confession is the fact that it is stated collectively – in the plural.

עַל חַטָּא שֶׁחַטַּאנוּ לְפָנֶיךָ

For the sin we have committed against you. . .¹

The liturgy does not claim to speak for our personal sins. Instead, we confess together, as a community, although we do not know how we each individually have fared. אָשָׁמְנוּ we say – “we are guilty.” “We betray. We steal. We scorn. We act perversely. We are cruel. We scheme. We are violent. We slander. . .²”

We. Together, we sin. Why in the plural? Because we are community. If one of us sins, we all hold responsibility. If one of us carries hate, we are all affected. If some of us are in danger from disease or economic distress, we are all responsible. We are community. We are none of us exempt. Wealth, privilege, honor do not protect us or separate us. We are responsible.

As we learn in the Talmud (*Taanit* 11a):

בְּזִמְנָן שֶׁהַצְּבוּר שְׂרוּי בַּצַּעַר אֵל יֹאמֵר אָדָם
אֶלְךָ לְבֵיתִי וְאוֹכֵל וְשׂוֹמֵר וְשָׁלוֹם עֲלֶיךָ נִפְשִׁי

At a time when the community is suffering, no one should say, "I will go home, eat, drink, and be at peace with myself."

¹ Machzor Yom Kippur, from Maimonides Mishneh Torah, Order of Prayer 4:2

² Translation: Mishkan Hanefesh, Machzor for the Days of Awe, Yom Kippur, CCAR Press:NY 2015, p. 296 and etc.

That is the nature of community in our Jewish tradition: communal responsibility. Not all are public with their suffering, but where there is suffering we cannot isolate ourselves in private. Our tradition teaches ³כל ישראל ערבים זה לזה we are each responsible for one another.

This seems to go strongly against an idea we hear too often these days, a concern for individual freedom rather than communal responsibility.

We see this most prominently today, of course, in the strange case of mask-wearing during the pandemic. Most of us during lock-down have had too much time to watch disturbing videos on social media. There is a whole genre of angry men and women yelling at store or restaurant employees who are trying to enforce mask-wearing rules. My brother-in-law, who runs a restaurant in Idaho, tells the story of experiencing these interactions first-hand. When he tries to explain that he is just trying to protect the health and safety of his employees and customers, the yelling about personal freedom starts; often accompanied by boycott threats. Many of our business-owning congregants, especially those in the retail or service industries, have similar stories. This is not fun for business owners who are trying to hold on in difficult economic times. This is not easy for people who are trying to obey the law. This is not easy for those who are doing their part to slow the spread of a deadly communicable disease.

I remember the first time a stranger driving past yelled at me “take off your mask.” It is an odd feeling. The first reaction is to wonder: what I am doing wrong? Am I in the wrong place? Have I violated a social norm? Did I do something offensive?

The second reaction is to hope that the shouter is not armed.

Something in our culture is angrily fighting this idea of shared responsibility. Something in our culture screams not only a demand for personal freedom, but hatred towards those who participate in communal care.

Curiously, this is not a new phenomenon. In John Barry’s highly readable book “The Great Influenza⁴” about the pandemic of 1918, he tells of the culture wars throughout the United States surrounding shutdowns, school closings and mask-wearing a century ago, although the masks of the time were evidently less effective against that particular epidemic. Masks and closure orders were highly contested here in Portland during that time as well.⁵ A Portland area church in 1918 petitioned the State to keep all churches open during their closure. As one church representative said:

³ Sefer Chasidim 233:1 and many other places

⁴ Viking Penguin:New York 2004

⁵ <https://www.influenzaarchive.org/cities/city-portland.html#>

That now, when woe and pestilence are abroad, and the whole world is torn with strife, the police power of the state should not be used to prevent Christian worship in the churches, but that all should be able to exercise their constitutional right to worship God according to the dictates of their own consciences.⁶

Quite similar language was used months ago in an unsuccessful lawsuit by 10 churches against the state of Oregon⁷.

Other churches then, as now, took the opposite tack, with pastors requiring masks for church attendance and calling for universal mask wearing as well as a return to a closure order which many feared had been lifted too soon.⁸

As we have previously noted: **וְאֵין כֵּל-חֲדָשׁ תַּחַת הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ**: – *There is nothing new Beneath the sun!* (Eccl 1:9)

Yet through all this anger and division, our Jewish tradition gives us peaceful guidance. It asks of us, actually demand of us, to see ourselves as interconnected, to see the relationship between ourselves and others and to take responsibility for it. Again, this is not new. The Talmud tells the story of an earlier time of plague (*Taanit* 21b):

They said to Shmuel: There is pestilence in the region of Bei Hozai, which is quite a distance from Babylonia. Shmuel **decreed a fast. They said to him: But it is far** from here. **He said: There is no crossing here that will stop** the pestilence, and therefore there is cause for concern that it will reach us.

Shmuel knew that it is human nature to think of another's problems as far away from our own concern. But the reality is there are no boundaries that separate our troubles. No matter how big our house, no matter how high our walls, we live in the same community.

Our fast on this Yom Kippur is a reminder of our shared humanity.

The hunger of another person is our problem. The homelessness we see on the streets of our city is our problem. The violence on the streets and the violence of our peace officers is our problem. The suffering of those who have lost their livelihoods during this economic crisis is our problem. The shuttering of businesses and the loss of meaningful work for so many is our problem. *Ashamnu*. We are guilty. We are guilty of turning a blind eye to the suffering of others. We are guilty of worrying only about our own needs and not holding enough

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ <https://www.oregonlive.com/coronavirus/2020/05/10-oregon-churches-sue-governor-want-to-worship-without-restrictions-amid-coronavirus-pandemic.html>

⁸ *Ibid.* quoting "Wear Masks To Church, Advice," *Oregon Daily Journal*, 18, Jan. 1919, 1, "Flu Masks Will Be Required by Church," *Oregon Daily Journal*, 19 Jan. 1919, 1, "Portland Churches Ask Epidemic Ban," *Morning Oregonian*, 20 Jan. 1919, 8.

compassion for others. We are none of us inured from the shattering reality of our time. We have differing abilities to help, but we are all called to use the resources we have to make a difference.

The biblical Book of Esther tells of a queen hiding her Jewish identity and afraid to expose her concern for her people, lest it jeopardize her personal safety. Esther's cousin Mordecai responds:

Do not imagine that you, of all the Jews, will escape with your life by being in the king's palace. On the contrary, if you keep silent in this crisis, relief and deliverance will come to the Jews from another quarter, while you and your father's house will perish. And who knows, perhaps you have attained to royal position for just such a crisis. (Esther 4:13-14)

Perhaps today, we have attained our own personal resources for just such an era. Perhaps the crisis of today calls us to action. We need to put on our masks, safely step out of our quarantine and seek out those in need. Food banks need our help. Homeless shelters need our help. Isolated and lonely friends and family members need our contact. It is not just those in positions of power who are required to be responsible members of our community. We are *all* commanded not to "stand idly by" (Lev. 19:16). Perhaps the Torah expresses this commandment in the negative because it is our human inclination to freeze – to be unsure – to wait for someone else to help. We wonder if *their* pain is really *my* problem.

We need to stop wondering. Assuredly, it is.

Ashamnu. On Yom Kippur, we confess collectively. We are responsible collectively. We act personally and collectively. We are, each of us, a part of our community. In this era when collective responsibility has become politicized, when shared sacrifice has become mocked, may we remember that these Days of Awe call us to look not only within ourselves at our own failings, but outside of ourselves to the needs of our community. May we move from reflection of self to recognition of all. In this time of difficulty and danger may we take the responsibility to care for one another and keep each other safe. May our masks, donned to protect each other, be symbols not of liberty lost but of community gained.