



Atonement: An Interplay Between the Individual and the Community

Rabbi Gordon Tucker

As vice chancellor for Religious Life and Engagement, Rabbi Gordon Tucker focuses on enhancing Jewish life at JTS, enriching our study of Judaism with the joy and deep understanding that only lived experience can provide. A leading scholar and interpreter of Conservative Judaism, he also articulates the enduring power of JTS's compelling approach to Jewish law and Jewish life, while strengthening JTS's religious leadership through partnerships with organizations in the Conservative Movement and beyond.

Rabbi Tucker's current role brings him back to JTS, where he served as dean of The Rabbinical School from 1984 to 1992 and as assistant professor of Jewish Thought from 1979 to 1994. He was ordained at JTS in 1975 after receiving his A.B. at Harvard College. He also earned a PhD in Philosophy from Princeton University.

Rabbi Tucker served from 1994 to 2018 as senior rabbi of one of North America's foremost Conservative congregations, Temple Israel Center in White Plains, NY. Under his leadership, the synagogue flourished and was characterized by vibrant communal life and an exceptional devotion to Jewish learning.

Rabbi Tucker is the author of scores of articles on Jewish theology and law, and published *Heavenly Torah*, a translation of and commentary on Abraham Joshua Heschel's three-volume work on rabbinic theology. An anthology of his writings was published in 2014, under the title *Torah for its Intended Purpose*. Most recently, his new commentary on Pirkei Avot was published by the Rabbinical Assembly in 2018.

I. THE DAYS OF AWE – DAYS OF COMMUNITY?

Babylonian Talmud *Berakhot* 58a

Our Masters taught: If one sees massive numbers of the people Israel, one says: “Blessed is the One Who knows all Secrets” (ברוך חכם הרזים). For none of their thoughts are the same, nor are their physical appearances identical.”

Babylonian Talmud *Pesahim* 64b

Our Masters taught: Never was a person trampled in the Temple courtyard at the time of the Pesah offering, except for one year, in the time of Hillel, when it happened to one elderly man, and that became known as the “Pesah of trampling”.

II Kings 23:21-23

The king commanded all the people, “Offer the Pesah sacrifice to the LORD your God as prescribed in this scroll of the covenant.”

Now the Pesah sacrifice had not been offered in that manner in the days of the chieftains who ruled Israel, or during the days of the kings of Israel and the kings of Judah.

Only in the eighteenth year of King Josiah was such a Pesah sacrifice offered in that manner to the LORD in Jerusalem.

Babylonian Talmud *Pesahim* 64b

The Sages taught: Once, King Agrippa wished to set his eyes on the multitudes [*ukhlosin*] of Israel [i.e. to take a census]. He said to the High Priest: Count up the Paschal lambs. The High Priest took a kidney from each one, and six hundred thousand pairs of kidneys were found there, double the number of those who left Egypt. And, that excluded those who were ritually impure or at a great distance. Moreover, there was not a single Paschal lamb that did not have more than ten people registered for it. They called that Pesah “the Pesah of the crowded”.

II. UNETANEH TOKEF RECEIVED BY INDIVIDUAL AND COMMUNITY

Harold Schulweis, *For Those Who Can't Believe*, 1994, pp. 102-103

Dear Rabbi,

Until this morning I knew the central liturgy of the holiday well, but before this year I had approached it in an abstract intellectual manner. This year, I could not do so. Several months ago I had surgery for cancer, and I felt very keenly as I approached these days that in a real sense my fate for the coming year has been written, if not in a book of judgment, then in my own body. I look forward to health but I may not be granted it. As I read, the questions of the service were familiar: “How many shall pass away and how many shall be born; who shall live and who shall die?” But the response — “Repentance, prayer, and righteousness avert the severe decree” — for the first time carried a terrifying implication. It seemed to me as I read this that my own liturgy was binding my fate to my behavior; that my illness, seen in this light, has been the result of some terrible unknown transgression, and that the ultimate punishment for failure to discover and correct it could be my death. I do not believe this — not with my head or with my heart. Nevertheless, as a committed Jew who takes language very seriously and believes in community prayer, I would be forced to repeat the central cornerstone over and over should I attend services for Yom Kippur. It seems today that my choice is a terrible one: to flagellate myself emotionally by joining my congregation or to spare my feelings by isolating myself from my family, my friends, my community. It is a choice I never believed I would have to make.....I write with pain hoping that from the expression of my dilemma will grow some insight, some way to cope.

Matti Friedman, “A Yom Kippur Melody Spun from Grief, Atonement, and Memory”, *Times of Israel*, 9/25/12

One day after the [1973] war's end, 11 small army trucks pulled through the kibbutz gates [*Beit Hashitta*], headlights on even though it was daytime. Each bore one coffin. The dead men were the kibbutz's next generation — young workers and fathers, most of them reservists. For a small and tightly knit community, it was a nearly incomprehensible loss.....From 1973 on, Yom Kippur on the kibbutz became a day of mourning for the men killed in the war.

The grief of Beit Hashita was still raw 17 years later, in 1990, when one of Israel's best-known songwriters, Yair Rosenblum, came to stay at the kibbutz.....As Yom Kippur approached, he “decided to give something

personal, something of himself, to this special day, kibbutz member Michal Shalev wrote.....

Flipping through a High Holidays prayerbook, he came across “Unetaneh Tokef.”.....

Thought to be considerably more than a millennium old — its precise roots have been lost to history — the text of the prayer could not have been farther from the kibbutz’s militantly secular approach to Yom Kippur, which members had marked as a day of meditation and honoring the dead that had nothing to do with a God whose nonexistence they considered to be an article of faith.

“Yair read it and knew this was what he was looking for,” wrote Shalev. “He didn’t shut his eyes all night, and waited for the morning, for the house to be empty of people and for a chance to play uninterrupted.” When Shalev arrived at about 10 a.m., she found Rosenblum “writing and crying.” He played her a tune he had written for the prayer — a melding of European cantorial melodies, Sephardic tunes and modern Israeli music. “It was one of those moments in which you feel shaken and an excitement that has no room for words,” she wrote.

The song was sung at the end of the ceremony on the eve of Yom Kippur that year, 1990. Rosenblum had introduced an unapologetically religious text into a stronghold of secularism and touched the rawest nerve of the community, that of the Yom Kippur war. The result appears to have been overpowering. “When Hanoch began to sing and broke open the gates of heaven, the audience was struck dumb,” Shalev wrote.

“Something special happened,” another member, Ruti Peled, wrote..... “It was like a shared religious experience that linked the experience of loss (which was especially present since the war), the words of the Jewish prayer (expressing man’s nothingness compared to God’s greatness, death to sanctify God’s name and accepting judgment) and the melody (which included elements of prayer).”

III. CONFESSION AS VICTORY

Yisrael Lifschitz, “Tiferet Yisrael”, on Mishnah Ta’anit 4:8

It seems to me that this [the idea that Israel, having fasted and confessed, is presenting itself with pride and confidence before its Creator] is also the reason for the custom among the Jews to sing “Ashamnu” on Yom Kippur. One would expect that prayer to call forth a dirge and not an upbeat song!

Yet we have here a hint that repentance has transformed sins into merits, and it is well worth singing about those merits!

Jonathan L. Friedmann, “The Victory of Confession: Ashamnu, the Shirah, and Musical Symbolism in Jewish Worship”, in *Intermountain West Journal of Religious Studies* Volume 2, Number 1 (2010), pp. 70-72

In Ashkenazi synagogues during Yom Kippur, Ashamnu begins with a quotation from the first part of the Shirah melody. On its surface, this practice seems to contradict the text’s plaintive tone:

We have become guilty, we have betrayed, we have robbed, we have spoken slander. We have caused perversion, we have caused wickedness, we have sinned willfully, we have extorted, we have accused falsely. We have given evil counsel, we have been deceitful, we have scorned, we have rebelled, we have provoked, we have turned away, we have been perverse, we have acted wantonly, we have persecuted, we have been obstinate. We have been wicked, we have corrupted, we have been abominable, we have strayed, You have let us go astray.

Ashamnu travels through the Hebrew alphabet, each letter beginning a different moral transgression.....The grave words of Ashamnu seem antithetical to the triumphant strains of the Shirah. Ashamnu spells out in detail “how we tend to sin, to negate the promise of life, in our own existence,” which is a far cry from the celebratory and life-affirming words sung following the Red Sea crossing. Moreover, worshipers stand slightly bent and beat their chests at each mention of sin, indicating that evil stems from the heart. In fact, the only obvious link between these texts is that Ashmanu is sung as a call-and-response between cantor and congregation, a method that recalls the responsorial singing of Moses and the Israelites in the Exodus account. Yet while this manner of singing in Exodus emphasizes the collective nature of redemption, its use in singing Ashamnu suggests collective sinfulness. Ashamnu’s connection with the Shirah melody, then, appears an example of what Barbara Babcock termed “symbolic inversion”: “any act of expressive behavior which inverts, contradicts, abrogates, or in any fashion presents an alternative to commonly-held social codes, values, and norms, be they linguistic, literary or artistic, religious or social, and political.” When attached to the Shirah tune, this relentless list of transgressions, epitomizing human fallibility and our apparent helplessness in the face of our darkest impulses, is overlaid with a sense of exaltation. The music symbolically inverts the prayer from darkness to light. The few scholars who have attempted to explain the link between Ashmanu and the

Shirah see the melody as providing a sense of hope to worshipers seeking exoneration from sin. But in both the Exodus account and the other texts to which the melody is applied, the Shirah marks a victorious moment after the completion of a journey or task, not a longing for future release. It can thus be argued that the connection between Ashamnu and the Shirah melody is based on the notion that confession itself is a triumphant act.

Joseph Soloveitchik, *On Repentance* (translated by Pinchas Peli), pp. 117-119

The individual cannot demand acquittal.....as he stands before God as an individual, he is dominated by the conviction that he has sinned.....And he knows that sin entails punishment.....Individual confession can lead to only one conclusion – justification of the sentence.

Communal confession, made by the prayer leader, is based on completely different assumptions:.....For we are your people and You are our God, we are Your children and You are our parent.....we are Your beloved and You are our lover.....First, all this, and only afterward comes the prayer: “Ashamnu, Bagadnu, etc....” Only after confirmation of the love and close relationship prevailing between the flock and the shepherd, the vineyard and the guard, the woman and her lover – only then do we arrive at the stage of communal recognition of sin expressed in the short confession of “we have sinned”.

The difference between individual and communal confession is tremendous. When the individual confesses he does so from a state of insecurity, depression, and despair in the wake of sin.....In contrast, *Kneset Yisrael*,,,,confesses out of a sense of confidence and even rejoicing, for it does so in the presence of a loyal ally, before its most beloved one. In fact, in certain Jewish communities (I myself heard this in Germany) it is customary for the whole congregation to sing the *al-het* confession in heartwarming melodies.

IV. AN “ANTI-CONFESSION”: CONNECTION LIFTS THE INDIVIDUAL

Nahman of Bratzlav, *Likkutei MoHaRaN* I:282 (Translation by Arthur Green)

You have to judge every person generously. Even if you have reason to think that person is completely wicked, it’s your job to look hard and seek out some bit of goodness, some place in that person where he is not evil. When you

find that bit of goodness and judge the person *that way*, you really may raise him up to goodness. Treating people this way allows them to be restored, to come to *teshuvah*.

This is why the Psalmist said: “Just a little bit more and there will be no wicked one; you will look at his place and he will not be there” (Psalms 37:6).....By looking for that “little bit”, the place however small within them where there is no sin (and everyone, after all, has such a place), and by telling them, showing them, that *that’s* who they are, we can help them change their lives.

Then indeed you will “look at his place” and find that the wicked one is no longer there – not because she has died or disappeared – but because, with your help, she will no longer be where you first saw her. By seeking out that bit of goodness you allowed *teshuvah* to take its course.

So now, my clever friend, now that you know how to do this – now go do it for yourself as well! You know what I have taught you: “Take great care: be happy always! Stay far, far away from sadness and depression.” I’ve said it to you more than once. I know what happens when you start examining yourself. “No goodness at all!” you find. “Just full of sin.” Watch out for Old Man Gloom, my friend, the one who wants to push you down. This is one of his best tricks. That’s why I said: “Now go do it for yourself as well,”all you need to find is just the smallest bit: even a dot of goodness. That should be enough to give you life, to bring you back to joy. By seeking out that little bit even in yourself and judging yourself *that way*, showing yourself that *that* is who you are, you can change your whole life and bring yourself to *teshuvah*.

It’s that first dot of goodness that’s the hardest one to find (or the hardest one to *admit* you find!). The next ones will come a little easier, each one following another. And you know what? These little dots of goodness in yourself – after a while you will find that you can *sing* them and they become your *niggun*, the *niggun* you fashion by not letting yourself be pushed down, and by rescuing your own good spirit from all that darkness and depression. The *niggun* brings you back to life and then you can start to pray.