The Weight We Carry, The Hope We Hold

Kol Nidre. The words themselves feel heavy. The melody is haunting, ancient, etched into our bones. It is a sound that reaches beyond history, carrying all the broken promises and hopes of our people.

And tonight, we gather at a moment of fragile possibility. Earlier this week, a new peace proposal was placed on the table, one that could return hostages to their families and bring relief to countless lives in Gaza and Israel. We do not know what tomorrow will bring, but we can pray that the seeds of peace take root. That, too, is part of what we carry into this sacred night.

Every year, when we come together on this night, the holiest evening of the year, we are reminded of the fragility of being human. We make vows we cannot keep. We stumble in ways we never intended. We carry the weight of regret. Tonight is about facing all of that honestly. It is about the guilt we feel, and the possibility of renewal.

But this year, another kind of weight presses on many of us, not from our own failings, but from the state of the world. We are haunted not only by the promises we broke, but by the images we see on the news. We are shaken not only by our own mistakes, but by the devastation unfolding thousands of miles away.

So the question arises with particular urgency: what guilt is really ours to carry and what guilt is not?

In 1972, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote: “Morally speaking, there is no limit to the concern one must feel for the suffering of human beings. Indifference to evil is worse than evil itself, [and] in a free society, some are guilty, but all are responsible.”[1] That line could be the headline of Yom

[1] Abraham Joshua Heschel, “*The Reasons for My Involvement in the Peace Movement,”* in *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1996), p. 225.

Kippur. Some are guilty, yes. But all of us are responsible. And tonight, we wrestle with what that really means.

I know from conversations with some of you that the war in Israel and Gaza has left you not only grieving and feeling utterly sad, but ashamed. I have heard these exact phrases:

"I feel ashamed as a Jew."
"I am embarrassed to be Jewish right now."
"Not in my name."
"We have lost our way."
"I can't in good conscience support Israel right now."

Let's pause on all of this tonight. Because Yom Kippur is all about facing our guilt. Which guilt belongs to us, and which guilt does not?

On Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, the cantor rises before God with the *Hineni* prayer. It is one of the most vulnerable prayers in our entire *machzor*. The *hazzan* pleads:

Do not count their sins against me, and do not count my sins against them.

Our *Mishkan Hanefesh machzor* deepens this:

Do not hold them responsible for my wrongs and offenses. May my deeds cause them no shame; and may their deeds cause me no shame.

At first, this seems to be only about the relationship between the service leader and the congregation. But it models something much bigger. It is a plea for moral clarity. Each of us carries our own actions before God, not someone else's. *Do not hold them responsible for my wrongs.* That echoes Ezekiel's teaching: *A child shall not bear the iniquity of the parent, nor the parent the iniquity of the child.*[2]

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[2] Ezekiel 18:20

This Jewish teaching could not be more clear: guilt is individual. Each of us bears the weight of our own deeds. We are not guilty for the sins of our parents or our children. We are not guilty for the sins of our fellow congregants. We are not guilty for the sins of our governments. We are not guilty for Hamas's barbarity. We are not guilty for Israel's military decisions. We are not guilty individually or collectively.

And yet the prayer does not end there. It goes further:

May my deeds cause them no shame; and may their deeds cause me no shame.

That is not about guilt. That is about shame. It acknowledges that while guilt is individual, our lives are bound up together, and when one person falters, it can reflect on us all even thought the prayer warns against this.

In other words, guilt is about what I have done wrong. It's personal, between me and God or me and another person. The *Hineni* prayer makes clear that guilt is not transferable: I don't carry your sins, and you don't carry mine. But the line *May my deeds cause them no shame; and may their deeds cause me no shame* is addressing something different, not guilt, but dishonor. Shame isn't just individual—it's relational and communal. If I act dishonorably, it can reflect on my community. Likewise, if another Jew acts badly, even if I have nothing to do with it, I may feel implicated because we are bound together as one people.

We know this feeling. When a famous Jew commits fraud or abuse—Madoff, Epstein, Weinstein—we cringe. We feel that extra layer of shame: "Ugh, he's one of us." "Did he have to be Jewish?" It is human nature, and maybe Jewish nature, to feel implicated when one of our own acts terribly.

So I understand why some Jews feel shame about Israel, about Netanyahu and his Kahanist ministers, about decisions made in this war. That, too, is human. To some of us it feels like our extended family members are making really bad choices and saying some really awful things. The deeper truth is this: shame of that kind does not serve us. It does not heal, it does

not repair, it does not change what is happening. At most, it is a cry of outrage—understandable, perhaps even justified, but still only a cry.

Expressing frustration or moral protest can feel cathartic—it's a release of emotions. But if it stops there, it has no lasting impact. Fury by itself rarely leads to repair. What transforms it is when we let righteous anger awaken compassion and move us toward prayer, toward growth, toward change. That is when indignation becomes redemptive.

Our task is not to be paralyzed by shame, but to channel our deepest convictions into lives that bring honor to our people. *Hineni* reminds us that we are measured not by the failings of others, but by the integrity of our own choices.

And yet, in just a few moments, we will all rise and declare together in the short confessional: *Ashamnu, Bagadnu, Gazalnu—We have sinned, we have betrayed, we have stolen.*

What just happened here? Now we are all collectively guilty? Why do we say this in the plural? Why confess things we may never have done? This feel like a counterpoint to *Hineni*

The rabbis teach: *Kol Yisrael arevim zeh bazeh—all Israel is responsible for one another.*[3] This central tenet of Judaism underscores the profound connections within the Jewish community, reminding us that each person carries responsibility for the welfare of others—both by protecting them from inflicting harm and by helping to meet their needs. We confess communally not because I personally committed every wrong, but because I live in a society where these wrongs occurred. *Ashamnu* is about solidarity. It is about moral responsibility for the kind of world we are shaping together.

Two respected rabbinic scholars offer similar answers to the question of why *Ashamnu* is in the plural. Abraham Millgram explains in the book, *Jewish Worship*: "Any one of these sins may have been committed by

[3] BT Shevuot 39a

someone in the congregation, and the assembly shares the responsibility and prays for its forgiveness. Moral corruption is not the concern of the sinner alone; it is also the concern of the whole social organism."[4]

Reuven Hammer puts it similarly in *Entering the High Holy Days*: "We confess not only those things we may have done personally, but everything done by anyone within the community. Each person shares in the responsibility for society as a whole."[5]

Both Millgram and Hammer teach us that we confess in the plural because sin is never only private. Even if I did not commit a particular wrong, living in community means I share in the responsibility for the moral fabric of our society. When one person falters, it affects us all.

Going back to Reuven Hammer's quote, I am curious what exactly constitutes "community"? For the liturgists who shaped our prayers, it was not world Jewry. It was not a government halfway across the globe. It was the synagogue, the town, the people who actually shaped one another's lives. Hammer's words matter here: *within the community.* That's where shared responsibility has power. Our "guilt" does not extend beyond the border of our local populace even in our interconnected world.

Rabbi David Teutsch adds something wonderfully practical about the Kol Nidre confessional prayers[6]: if each of us confessed only our own sins aloud, everyone would know what they were. That would be *halbanat panim*—humiliating another person in public—which Jewish law considers a grave sin in itself. By confessing together, we preserve one another's dignity. No one is singled out.

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[4] Abraham Millgram, *Jewish Worship* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1971), 130.

[5] Reuven Hammer, Entering the High Holy Days: A Guide to Origins, Themes, and Prayers (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1998), 140.

[6] David A. Teutsch, *Kol Haneshamah: Prayerbook for the Days of Awe* (Wyncote, PA: Reconstructionist Press, 1999), p. 327.

And maybe that's the simplest and truest answer of all. *Ashamnu* may be written in the plural not as a sweeping statement about global Jewish guilt, not even as a grand philosophy of solidarity, but simply as a way of protecting privacy. We confess together so that no one is shamed. At the end of the day, perhaps it is really that straightforward: the plural preserves our dignity.

Regardless, This tension between the individual and the collective is central to Yom Kippur and shapes how we think about guilt itself.

Guilt, when rightly held, is clarifying. But when guilt is misplaced—when we carry what is not ours—it becomes corrosive.

In our own society, many thoughtful people burden themselves with guilt for wrongs they did not commit. We see it when individuals feel pressure to atone for injustices long past, or when they apologize simply for belonging to a group associated with power. The impulse comes from a moral place, a desire not to deny history or minimize suffering, but it often leaves people stuck in self-condemnation rather than moving toward healing or meaningful change.

When guilt isn't ours to carry, it doesn't strengthen us—it paralyzes us. It traps us in shame or empty protest that may feel righteous but rarely lead to repair. True obligation is forward-looking: asking what we can do now, not endlessly replaying what we did not do then.

Our tradition insists that guilt is not inherited. We are responsible for what we do in our own time, not for what others did before us. That doesn't absolve us of caring about history's wounds. We are still called to repair the brokenness left in their wake, but it does free us from carrying the guilt of actions we did not commit.

And yet, guilt also tells us something. It tells us that our hearts are not stone. To feel guilt, even misplaced guilt, is to signal that we care. Sometimes guilt serves as a catalyst, compelling us to acknowledge the lingering impact of past wrongs rather than erase them from memory.

Misplaced though it may be, guilt is still evidence of a conscience that refuses to be numb.

This all makes me think of the Hebrew prophets: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos—their voices thunder with fury at injustice, but they are rooted in covenantal values. Neither moral clarity nor indignation alone is enough; together they stir responsibility.

And I know that for some of you, the moral shame and outrage are directed squarely at Israel itself—at a Jewish state acting in ways that feel to you like a betrayal of Jewish values. That pain is real. Our prophets knew it too, crying out not only against foreign enemies but against Israel when she strayed from the covenant. Moral outrage holds a sacred place in our tradition. But here is the difference: the prophets did not stop at anger. They turned it into a call for *teshuvah*, for accountability, for repair.

So if you find yourselves feeling shame, know that you are not alone. The challenge is to let that feeling become a compass—guiding us back to our values, to Jewish living, and toward the healing work that is ours to do. As Dr. Ellen Umansky puts it: "We are affected but not infected by sin. It is what human beings do, not who we are."[7] Yes, we are touched by it, when Israel makes choices that wound human beings, when Palestinians suffer devastation, when moral clarity grows cloudy. But we are not infected. We are not guilty for decisions made thousands of miles away.

Not every Jewish leader frames this moment in the same way. Rabbi Sharon Brous, in a widely shared sermon this Rosh Hashanah, spoke of what she sees as a profound moral failure within the Jewish community—a failure to confront Israel's role in Palestinian suffering with enough courage and clarity. Her voice, and others like it, challenge us to take moral outrage seriously, to make sure our empathy is not selective.

For some of you, that message resonates deeply. You hear her words and think: yes, that is what Jewish conscience demands right now. And I honor

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[7] Ellen M. Umansky, "Some Are Guilty, All Are Responsible," in *We Have Sinned: Sin and Confession in Judaism*, ed. Lawrence A. Hoffman (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 2008), 232.

that. For others, her framing may feel unbearable, even accusatory, as if our Jewishness itself is something to apologize for.

But here is the question I cannot escape: how can any of us know what it means to wage an impossible war? From the outside, it's easy to say what should be done. But if you are the one responsible for protecting a nation under attack from multiple fronts, every option looks terrible. We must acknowledge the limits of our perspective even in the face of such horrific images on the news. How can we, from the safety of distance, presume to carry the burden of decisions made in real time, under existential threat, by a people whose very survival is on the line? That is not a question of conscience alone. It is a question of sovereignty, security, and the tragic complexity of war. Moral clarity matters, but wars are not decided by values and principles alone. They are shaped by the right of a state to protect itself, by security needs, such as preventing future attacks, and the messy, tragic realities of warfare where innocent lives are lost no matter what. We must recognize that war is not fought solely in the realm of ethics, but in the tragic space where survival and morality are forced to wrestle with one another.

So my task tonight is not to dismiss those voices, but to offer another way of holding the tension. Where Rabbi Brous speaks of moral failure, I want to speak of moral responsibility. Where some say, "We are guilty," I want to say: no, we Jews are not guilty for the choices of a government. But we are responsible for how we carry ourselves as Jews in this moment—how we hold compassion for all who suffer, how we build bridges and friendships with those from different backgrounds, how we pray, how we teach our children, how we use our voices for peace, and how we speak about the Jewish homeland.

In this way, I hope we can create space for the full range of Jewish responses in this room. Some of you may feel pulled toward outrage. Some may feel fiercely defensive of Israel. Some may simply feel exhausted. (Present company included!) All of that belongs here. My role tonight is to remind us that even in the midst of division, our tradition gives us a path forward: *Hineni*: I carry my own guilt, not yours. *Ashamnu*: and yet, together

we confess that our shared world is broken, and together we must help repair it.

So what does responsibility look like if it isn't guilt? It looks like practice—the daily rhythms that anchor Jewish life: prayer, study, Shabbat, tzedakah. It looks like guarding our speech so it uplifts rather than wounds, and teaching our children not only to be proud Jews but also to be *menschen*, people of conscience. And it looks like small, concrete steps of presence and compassion—giving tzedakah that sustains both Israelis and Palestinians, reading with open eyes from more than one perspective, listening carefully when a fellow congregant says, "I feel ashamed to be Jewish right now," or "Can people stop blaming Israel for everything?" and responding not with argument but with care.

These are not burdens; they are foundations. They steady us when guilt or despair threatens to sweep us away. They keep our hearts tender. They remind us that to live as Jews of conscience is not to carry the sins of others, but to take responsibility for how *we* live, how *we* listen, and how *we* love.

After all of this wrestling, with guilt, with shame, with responsibility, I want to end in a different place: with pride. Not arrogance, not blindness, but pride. Pride that we belong to a people who refuses to let suffering harden our hearts. Pride that our tradition insists on both justice and mercy, on honesty and hope. Pride that we are still here, singing *Ashamnu* tonight, as our ancestors did through exile and persecution, through wars and heartbreak. And we pray with all our hearts that those still held hostage in Gaza may one day be returned to their families, and to us, so that they too may stand and beat their chest as they sing *Ashamnu*. At the same time, we cannot ignore the suffering of innocent Palestinians—the destruction of homes, the loss of lives, the anguish of ordinary families caught in the crossfire. Their pain, too, is bound up with our own, and our humanity demands that we hold them in prayer. May our children and grandchildren inherit a Jewish future that models wholeness—where living with dignity means holding multiple values in balance, not in conflict.

So no, I will not be ashamed to be a Jew. I will not be ashamed to love Israel, even when I wrestle with her choices. And I will rejoice in a tradition that calls me, year after year, to deepen compassion and to shape a life worthy of our people. And on this night of Kol Nidre, Jewish life—stubborn, resilient, beautiful Jewish life—reminds us that even in the hardest seasons, we walk forward with faith, with strength, and with pride.

May this be the story we live into—in this season, and in the year to come.