

We Have Sinned

T'SHUVAH IN A GLOBALIZED WORLD

Lisa Exler and Ruth Messinger

Yom Kippur is about seeking forgiveness, making things right, and starting the year with a clean slate. And yet, the confessional prayers that form the basis of the liturgy on the day itself seem disconnected from this goal. The litany of sins that we repeat so many times does not reflect our specific misdeeds and has little practical impact on rectifying our transgressions or repairing our broken relationships. It seems strange that on a day when we aim to examine ourselves truthfully and change for the better, we repeat a list that is far from personal.

Instead, we stand under the anonymous cover of the whole congregation, expressing collective regret for a range of possible sins committed against a nameless group of unspecified victims. Together, we intone: “*We* have sinned ...; For the sin *we* have committed before You ...; Forgive *us*.” We admit all manner of possible transgressions, yet never in the liturgy do we pause to name specific individuals or pledge to confront the victims of these misdeeds and ask for their forgiveness.

This stands in stark contrast to the process of repentance that our tradition encourages us to undertake in the days and weeks leading up to Yom Kippur: examining our actions and the harm that we have done,

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intentionally or unintentionally, to our friends, family, neighbors, and colleagues—and approaching those people to apologize and commit to doing better.

Our *t'shuvah* process echoes Maimonides's prescription for seeking forgiveness, which focuses on repairing interpersonal relationships. According to Maimonides, the first step is to take personal responsibility for having committed a sin by verbally confessing it, a confession phrased in the singular: “*I sinned, I erred, I transgressed...*”¹ The second step—making restitution and asking the victim of the sin for forgiveness—is an intimate interaction between two individuals. And the final step is a personal pledge not to commit the sin again. According to Maimonides—and probably many of us—repentance and forgiveness are personal matters; relationships are mended at the individual level.

Given that this individualized repentance process seems much better suited to actually righting our wrongs than the collective confessional of the Yom Kippur service, what is the purpose of the liturgy?

While the litany of collective sins against nameless victims may not advance our personal processes of repentance, it dictates a radical view of our responsibility for each other. By implicating ourselves in this long list of sins inflicted by our fellow humans—including hardening our hearts, denying and lying, sins in commerce, haughty eyes—we remind ourselves that we play a role in the injustices taking place around the world that likely don't make our list of individual sins. But the liturgy forces us to remember that by association in the global community, and through our actions and inactions, we too are guilty of causing the poverty, hunger, and disease, the inequality, prejudice, and cruelty in the world.

This reminder is especially necessary for injustices that occur far from our view, such as those that affect people living in the developing world. As individuals, we do not take money or resources from people facing poverty in developing countries. We are not directly employing them and paying unfair wages or fueling wars that inhibit their development. But we are not blameless.

As the Yom Kippur service reminds us, again and again, *we have sinned*. We participate in the global economic and political systems that lead to many people's poverty. We buy clothes produced in sweatshops in which they work. We drink the coffee they grow. Our government, through legislators whom we elect, enacts trade policies that undermine their ability to grow and sell their produce. Corporations in which we

invest appropriate their land for factories and limit their access to life-saving medications. The confessional prayers on Yom Kippur—in their collective formulation—force us to confront our obligations to others in a global context and to reflect on how we can make amends if we have failed to meet those obligations.

So rather than being irrelevant for our personal *t'shuvah* process, it seems that the Yom Kippur liturgy just urges us to broaden it. But how to go about doing so—especially within the framework suggested by Maimonides—is a challenge. Although we may be able to name and confess the ways in which we have contributed to the oppression of people in developing countries, the role we play is complex and indirect; we do not know specifically whom we have harmed, nor could we find them in order to ask for forgiveness. And if we were to pledge never to commit these sins again, we would have to opt out of the global economy and go off the grid—a prospect that, for most of us, is impossible. So where does this leave us?

While we may not be able to complete this *t'shuvah* process, we can at least begin—vowing to act in ways that mitigate harm to the world's most marginalized people. As individuals, we can invest in socially responsible funds, purchase goods that were produced by workers who were paid fairly, and give *tz'dakah* to support organizations and initiatives working to improve the lives of people in developing countries.

And as a community, we can take action to pursue more widespread change. Peruvian theologian Gustavo Gutierrez suggests that just as our sins against people facing poverty are collective sins of our society, our response must be collective action as well:

The poor person does not exist as an inescapable fact of destiny. His or her existence is not politically neutral, and it is not ethically innocent. The poor are a by-product of the system in which we live and for which we are responsible. They are marginalized by our social and cultural world.... Hence the poverty of the poor is not a call to generous relief action, but a demand that we go and build a different social order.²

We can take up Gutierrez's call to build a different social order by recognizing and leveraging our collective power as citizens and consumers to build a more just world. As Gutierrez recognizes, this requires finding

solutions to poverty that move beyond offering short-term relief and instead empowering people to improve their own lives. On a practical level, we can engage in community-wide *tz'dakah* campaigns to provide our financial support to communities and organizations in developing countries that work for greater justice and equality. We can organize ourselves as investors and consumers to pressure corporations to carry out their business more ethically. Finally, we can marshal our collective power as citizens by lobbying our elected officials to enact policies that strengthen—rather than undermine—the self-sufficiency of people facing poverty.

And regarding those we have wronged: while we can't complete the *t'shuvah* process by asking individuals for forgiveness, we can instead use the Yom Kippur confessional liturgy as a substitute. As we recite the list of sins that “we” have committed, we can name and own these sins and, through our prayers, seek the forgiveness of those whom we will never meet, but who suffer because of us.

As we pray this Yom Kippur, let us pledge to pursue a global *t'shuvah*: to work collectively—not only to alleviate poverty and mitigate the negative effects of our global economic and political systems, but also to build a new social order in which poverty and oppression are replaced by equality and justice.



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