Aval Anahnu Va’avotenu Hatanu: Atoning for the Sins of Prior Generations?

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From the Mahzor: introduction to Ashamnu on Yom Kippur

Our God and God of our ancestors, hear our prayer; do not ignore our plea. Our God and God of our ancestors, we are neither so insolent nor so obstinate as to claim in Your presence that we are righteous, without sin; for we, like our ancestors who came before us, have sinned.

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לי א-להי וא-להי אבותינו [אבותינו]
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1. BT Yoma 87b

What does one say? Rav said: “You know the mysteries of the universe...” Shmuel said: “From the depths of the heart...” Levi said: “And in your Torah it is written, saying...” Rabbi Yohanan said: “Master of the Universe...”

Rabbi Yehuda said: “For our iniquities are too many to count and our sins are too great to number.” Rav Hamnuna said: “My God, before I was formed I was unworthy. Now that I have been formed, it is as if I had not been formed. I am dust while alive, how much more so when I am dead. See, I am before You like a vessel filled with shame and disgrace. May it be Your will that I may sin no more, and as for the sins I have committed before You, erase them in Your compassion, but not by suffering.” This is the confession that Rava used all year, and Rav Hamnuna Zuta on Yom Kippur.

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לא כי עיני
והיינו ידיהם דרובה חלוה שתהו דרב
הטנונה טשו בימיה דכולי

Mar Zutra said: We said these only if one did not say “But we have sinned.” However, if one said “But we have sinned” one needs nothing further. As Bar Hamduedei said: I was standing before Shmuel and he was sitting; and when the prayer leader reached the words: “But we have sinned” he stood. He said: Learn from here that this is the ikar of the confession.

אמר מר וטסי ולא אמר אלא אלו אמר
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דאמר בר מದשייה היא קמיה קמיה
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### 1a. Psalm 106:6

We, like our ancestors, have sinned; we have gone astray, done evil.

### 1b. Commentaries from Mahzor Lev Shalem

- Every human being is imperfect. Even previous generations—whom we may idealize—contained sinners. As the Rabbis taught: no one has walked the earth and not sinned.
- Some medieval commentators note that there is a measure of solace in remembering that our ancestors were imperfect but they were forgiven. Others object to the mention that our ancestors sinned, and so in some editions that phrase is omitted.
- Nehemiah reports that in rededicating themselves, the people gathered in the Temple courtyard and ‘confessed their own sins and the sins of their ancestors’ (Nehemiah 9:2). Medieval authors argued that knowledge that previous generations sinned, just as we do, empowers us to ask for forgiveness—for is not our own failing part of the very nature of the human condition?

### 2. Exodus 34:6-7 (see also Exod. 20:5; Num. 14:18; Deut. 5:9)

Adonai passed by before him, and called, Adonai, Adonai, God, merciful and gracious, long suffering, and abundant in lovingkindness and truth, extending lovingkindness for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, exonerating and not exonerating; visiting the sin of parents upon children, and upon children's children, to the third and fourth generation.

### 2a. Ezekiel 18:1-4, 18-22 (see also Jeremiah 31:28-29)

1. And the word of the Lord came to me, saying, 2. What do you mean by repeating this proverb concerning the land of Israel, saying: The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge? 3. As I live, says the Lord God, you shall not have occasion any more to use this proverb in Israel. 4. Behold, all souls are mine; as the soul of the parent, so also the soul of the child is mine; the soul that sins, it shall die.

18. As for his father, because he cruelly oppressed, robbed his brother, and did that which is not good among his people, behold, he shall die in his iniquity.

19. And you say, Why? Does not the son bear the iniquity of the father? When the son has done that which is lawful and right, and has kept all my statutes, and has done them, he shall surely live. 20. The soul that sins, shall die. The son shall not bear the iniquity of the father, neither shall the father bear the iniquity of the son; the righteousness of the righteous shall be upon
him, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon him. **21.** But if the wicked will turn from all his sins that he has committed, and keep all my statutes, and do that which is lawful and right, he shall surely live, he shall not die. **22.** None of his transgressions that he has committed shall be remembered against him; in his righteousness that he has done he shall live.

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**2b. BT Makkot 24a**

Rabbi Yosei bar Hanina said: Moshe Rabbenu decreed four decrees upon the Jewish people, and four prophets came and annulled them. ... Moses said: “Who visits the transgression of the parents upon the children” (Exod. 34:7). Ezekiel came and annulled it: “The person who sins shall die” (Ezek. 18:4).

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3. Tirzah Firestone, *Wounds into Wisdom—Healing Intergenerational Jewish Trauma*, 105

[Creative translation of ...]: “The mind of the universe observes the wounds of parents as they ripple down to their children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren.”

If individual trauma is a blow to the psyche that breaks through defenses with such suddenness and force that one cannot react to it effectively, then collective trauma is a blow to the living organism that is a community. Over time, a trauma-informed worldview may become embedded in the identity of the culture. Because it involves many life experiences, the harm works its way into the awareness of a group slowly and even insidiously, bringing with it a gradual realization that the social fabric of the community no longer exists in quite the same way, that the body politic, the ‘we’ of the people has been irrevocably changed.

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“Pinehas ben Elazar ben Aharon” (Num. 25:11). Rabbi Shimon said, “Son of, son of, twice, coming to restore the loss.” Rabbi Shimon said, “If a person obtains a recycled [i.e. reincarnated] soul and fails to have it rectified within him, it is as though he falsifies the truth of the Sovereign; and I apply to him this verse, ‘or if he finds something lost and denies it and swears falsely’ (Lev. 5:22). And denies it—better for him if he had never been created.”

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5. BT Gittin 55a (see also M. Eduyot 7:9)

If a stolen beam is built into a palace, restitution for it may be made in money, so as not to put obstacles in the way of penitents.
5a. R. Shalom Noah Berezovsky (1911-2000), *Netivot Shalom, Teshuvah #9*

A person’s task [in doing teshuvah] is comparable to a builder building a beautiful house on a pile of rubble. If one is not willing to invest the money and effort to dig out a deep and solid foundation, the building will not have a firm infrastructure. And therefore, cracks will continue to appear in the walls of the house, and each time, one will have to again make great expenditures to strengthen the building. Nevertheless, it will accomplish nothing, for additional fissures will again appear, and the house will be in continual danger of collapse. And there is only one path forward: to have the courage to demolish the whole structure of the house and dig deep and strong foundations, upon which a strong house can be built and established.

So too is teshuvah. Even though every year a person introduces repairs and improvements in the structure of one’s spiritual house, when it’s not built on a strong foundation, every year fissures and cracks will re-open, and one’s spiritual home will be in danger of tottering. Only once a person arrives at a circumstance where he/she has courage, and understands that all these “improvements” won’t solve the problem of one’s life, then will one dig deep foundations, and dig out the root of “gall and wormwood”, and then one can build a lasting house.

6. BT Makkot 23b-24a

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<th>Rabbi Simlai expounded: 613 mitzvot were communicated to Moses, 365 “don’ts” (negative mitzvot) equal to the number of solar days [in the year], and 248 “dos” (positive mitzvot) corresponding to the number of bones and sinews in the human body.... David came and stood them on 11, as it is written (Psalm 15).... Isaiah came and stood them on 6, as it is written (Isa. 33:15-16)....</th>
<th>דרש רבי שמלאי שมะואות ושולש עשרה מוצות נאמרו לו להם שלוש מאות וששים חומש לאוין כמנהין ימות התשה המאות והמאה וארבעים ושש מוניות שלשה כנות איברי של אדם... בא רוד והעם עליו אתת עשרה חציות מוןור לזרה, מי נגור באחטך מי ישים בחר קדרש... לא ייטהו והעם על וכד חי...</th>
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6a. Isaiah 33:15-16

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<th>One who walks in righteousness, and speaks uprightly, who abhors profit from oppression or fraud, who waves away a bribe instead of grasping it, who stops their ears against listening to infamy, and shuts their eyes against looking at evil—such a one shall dwell in lofty security.</th>
<th>כחקד וChangedEventArgs ישמחים כל אנשי ניצחון וביצה מתת אתו ביבס היום עיניים ואתה עיניים ביבס היום עיניים את משחתו: שהיטו יגמוטADS נא שמחים...</th>
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6b. Malbim on Isaiah 33:15

| The disgust relates to matters between human beings (i.e., ethical mitzvot), i.e., one should despise the profit with which one is able to surround one’s self through the oppression of and loss one can cause to others. | המס בדיבורו שבי ויוסIÊN לא תזרב והזא מתה בדיחה תיסכן והזא מתה בדיחה מתבשח:|Miztvat קלימין משמ빗: |