

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

<p>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.</p>	<p>אֱ-לֹהֵינוּ וְאֱ-לֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵינוּ [וְאִמּוֹתֵינוּ], תְּבֹא לִפְנֵיךָ תְּפִלָּתֵנוּ, וְאַל תִּתְעַלֵּם מִתְחַנְּנֵנוּ, שֶׁאִין אֲנַחְנוּ עֲזִי פָנִים וְקָשִׁי עֶרֶף לִוְמֵר לִפְנֵיךָ, ” אֱ-לֹהֵינוּ וְאֱ-לֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵינוּ [וְאִמּוֹתֵינוּ] צְדִיקִים אֲנַחְנוּ וְלֹא חָטָאנוּ, אֲבָל אֲנַחְנוּ וְאֲבוֹתֵינוּ [וְאִמּוֹתֵינוּ] חָטָאנוּ:</p>
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1. BT Yoma 87b

<p>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...”</p>	<p>מאי אמר אמר רב אתה יודע רזי עולם ושמואל אמר ממעמקי הלב ולוי אמר ובתורתך כתוב לאמר ר' יוחנן אמר רבון העולמים</p>
<p>Rabbi Yehudah 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.</p>	<p>ר' יהודה אמר כי עונותינו רבו מלמנות וחטאתינו עצמו מספר רב המנונא אמר אלהי עד שלא נוצרתי איני כדאי עכשיו שנוצרתי כאילו לא נוצרתי עפר אני בחיי ק"ו במיתתי הרי אני לפניך ככלי מלא בושה וכלימה יהי רצון מלפניך שלא אחטא ומה שחטאתי מרוק ברחמך אבל לא ע"י יסורין והיינו וידויא דרבא כולה שתא ודרב המנונא זוטא ביומא דכפורי</p>
<p>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 Hamdudei 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 <i>ikar</i> of the confession.</p>	<p>אמר מר זוטרא לא אמרן אלא דלא אמר אבל אנחנו חטאנו אבל אמר אבל אנחנו חטאנו תו לא צריך דאמר בר המדודי הוה קאימנא קמיה דשמואל והוה יתיב וכי מטא שליחא דצבורא ואמר אבל אנחנו חטאנו קם מיקם אמר שמע מינה עיקר וידוי האי הוא</p>

1a. Psalm 106:6

We, like our ancestors, have sinned; we have gone astray, done evil.	חָטְאָנוּ עִם-אֲבוֹתֵינוּ הָעֲוִינוּ הִרְשָׁעָנוּ:
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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.	וַיַּעֲבֹר ה' עַל-פָּנָיו וַיִּקְרָא ה' ה' אֱלֹהִים רַחוּם וְחַנּוּן אֶרֶךְ אַפַּיִם וְרַב-חַסֵּד וְאֵמֶת: נֹצֵר חַסֵּד לְאֲלֹפִים נִשְׂא עוֹן וּפֹשֶׁעַ וְחַטָּאָה וְנִקְהָ לֹא יִנְקֶה פָקֵד עוֹן אֲבוֹת עַל-בְּנִים וְעַל-בְּנֵי בְנִים עַל-שְׁלֹשִׁים וְעַל-רִבְעִים:
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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.	א וַיְהִי דְבַר-יְיָ אֵלַי לֵאמֹר: ב מִה-לְכֶם אַתֶּם מְשַׁלִּים אֶת-הַמִּשְׁלֵּל הַזֶּה עַל-אַדְמַת יִשְׂרָאֵל לֵאמֹר אֲבוֹת יָאָכְלוּ בֹסֵר וְשֵׁנֵי הַבָּנִים תִּקְהִינָה: ג חִי-אֲנִי נְאֻם אֲדֹנָי יי (קרי אֵל-הִים) אִם-יִהְיֶה לְכֶם עוֹד מִשְׁלֵּל הַמִּשְׁלֵּל הַזֶּה בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל: ד הֵן כָּל-הַנִּפְשוֹת לִי הֲנָה כְּנֶפֶשׁ הָאָב וְכְנֶפֶשׁ הַבֶּן לִי-הֲנָה הַנֶּפֶשׁ הַחַטָּאת הִיא תָמוּת:
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	יח אָבִיו כִּי-עָשָׂק עוֹשֶׂק גִּזַּל גִּזַּל אָח וְאֶשֶׁר לֹא-טוֹב עָשָׂה בְּתוֹךְ עַמּוֹ וְהִנֵּה- מֵת בְּעוֹנוֹ: יט וְאָמַרְתֶּם מַדּוּעַ לֹא-נִשְׂא הַבֶּן בְּעוֹן הָאָב וְהַבֶּן מִשְׁפָּט וְצִדְקָה עָשָׂה אֶת כָּל-חֻקוֹתֵי שְׁמִר וַיַּעַשׂה אֶתֶם חַיָּה יְחִיָּה: כ הַנֶּפֶשׁ הַחַטָּאת הִיא תָמוּת בֶּן לֹא-יִשָּׂא בְּעוֹן הָאָב וְאָב לֹא יִשָּׂא בְּעוֹן הַבֶּן צִדְקַת הַצָּדִיק עָלָיו תִּהְיֶה וְרִשְׁעַת רָשָׁע [הִרְשָׁע] עָלָיו תִּהְיֶה: ס

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.	כא וְהָרָשָׁע כִּי יָשׁוּב מִכָּל-חַטָּאתוֹ אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה וְשָׁמַר אֶת-כָּל-חֻקֹּתַי וְעָשָׂה מִשְׁפָּט וְצִדְקָה חַיָּה יְחִיָּה לֹא יָמוּת: כב כָּל-פְּשָׁעָיו אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה לֹא יִזְכְּרוּ לוֹ בְּצִדְקָתוֹ אֲשֶׁר-עָשָׂה יְחִיָּה:
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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).	אמר ר' יוסי בר חנינא ארבע גזירות גזר משה רבינו על ישראל באו ארבעה נביאים וביטלו ... משה אמר פוקד עון אבות על בנים בא יחזקאל וביטלה הנפש החוטאת היא תמות
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3. Tirzah Firestone, *Wounds into Wisdom—Healing Intergenerational Jewish Trauma*, 105

[Creative translation of ... עֵנָן אֲבוֹת]: "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.

4. Zohar 3:213a (Pritzker ed., vol IX, 502-03)

"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."	פִּנְחָס בֶּן אֶלְעָזָר וְגו'. אָמַר רַבִּי שְׁמַעוֹן, בֶּן בֶּן תְּרִי זְמַנִּי, לְאַשְׁלֵמָא אוּבְדָּא (נ"א עוּבְדָּא) קָא אָתִי. אָמַר רַבִּי שְׁמַעוֹן, הָאִי בֶר נֶשׁ דְּנָטִיל גְּלָגוּלָא דְנִשְׁמָתָא, וְלֹא זָכִי דִיתִתְקֹן בֵּיהּ, כְּאִילוּ מְשַׁקֵּר בְּקוּשְׁטָא דְמִלְכָּא. וְאַנָּא קְרִינָא עָלֶיהָ הָאִי קְרָא אוּ מְצָא אַבְיָדָה וְכֹחֶשׁ בֵּהּ וְנִשְׁבַּע עַל שְׁקָר. וְכֹחֶשׁ בֵּהּ, טַב לֵיהּ דְּלֹא אַבְרִי.
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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.	מתני'. העיד רבי יוחנן בן גודגדא: ... גמ'. ועל המריש הגזול שבנאו בבירה - שיטול את דמיו, מפני תקנת השבים.
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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

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)....	דרש רבי שמלאי שש מאות ושלש עשרה מצות נאמרו לו למשה שלש מאות וששים וחמש לאוין כמנין ימות החמה ומאתים וארבעים ושמונה עשה כנגד איבריו של אדם... בא דוד והעמידן על אחת עשרה דכתיב מזמור לדוד ה' מי יגור באהלך מי ישכון בהר קדשך... בא ישעיהו והעמידן על שש דכתיב....
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6a. Isaiah 33:15-16

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.	הֲלֹךְ צְדָקוֹת וְדָבַר מִיִּשְׁרָיִם מֵאֵס בְּבָצֵעַ מַעֲשָׂקוֹת נֶעַר כַּפְּיוֹ מִתְּמָד בְּשֹׁחַד אֵטָם אֲזָנוֹ מִשְׁמַע דְּמִים וְעֵצָם עֵינָיו מִרְאוֹת בָּרָע: הוּא מְרוֹמִים יִשְׁכֵּן מִצְדּוֹת סִלְעִים מְשֻׁגְבוֹ:
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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.	מאס בדברים שבין אדם לחברו הוא ממאס בריוח שיוכל לסבב מזה מעשקות והפסד לחברו.
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Aval Anahnu Va'avotenu Hatanu: Atoning for the Sins of Prior Generations?

Rabbi Jan Uhrbach, Director, Block / Kolker Center for Spiritual Arts, JTS

Supplementary sources

1. Samson Raphael Hirsch on Exod. 34:7

[He connects *notzer* (guarding, assuring, keeping) with *netzer*—the bud of a plant. And he says the greatest blessing one can receive is to be a plant-er of seeds that will blossom in the future for others,] “a thousandfold in time and eternity.”

“God allows the good that a person does to become ‘buds of blessings’ for all his/her descendants.”

2. Rabbenu Bahya ben Asher on Deut. 21:8

“grant atonement for Your people.” According to *Pessikta* (and *Sifri*) on our verse the word **כפר** refers to the living who can attain atonement by means of their money. The words **פדית**, “whom You redeemed,” refer to the already dead who will achieve their atonement by charity given by the living (in their name). The verse teaches that the donations made to the Temple treasury by the living on behalf of their dead accomplish something. This is so in an increased measure if the son donates in his father’s name; it is considered a merit for the departed father. The same applies to the recital of Kaddish by the son for his father. The concept is based on the fact that the son “eats” the “fruits” of his father. The same applies to the son acting as reader in the synagogue during his year of mourning. There is a *Baraitha* in *Massechet Kallah Rabbati* chapter 2 involving Rabbi Akiva rescuing the soul of a departed from purgatory through the son becoming pious, etc., although the father of that child had been the worst kind of sinner.

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כפר לעמך. דרשו בפסיקתא
אלו החיים שמתכפרין בממונם,
אשר פדית אלו המתים
שמתכפרין בממון החיים.
ולמדנו מזה שההקדשות
שנוהגין החיים להקדישם בעד
המתים, שיש להם תועלת
למתים, וכל שכן אם הבן
מקדיש בעד אביו שהוא זכות
לאביו בהיות אוכל הבן
פירותיו, והוא הדין לאומר
בשבילו קדיש או שום ברכה
בבית הכנסת בצבור, וכמו
שאמרו באגדה באותו מעשה
של רבי עקיבא, וכדאיתא
במסכת כלה.

3. Samson Raphael Hirsch on Deut. 21:8

Still deeper does a sentence in *Horieth* 6a take the meaning to be of this reference to the people redeemed from Egypt in the prayer on this occasion: “this *kapparah* is fit to bring atonement retrospectively right back to *yetziyat Mitzrayim*, the first generation redeemed from Egypt!” Whenever, at any time there is a Jewish generation that takes it gravely to heart, and is seriously perturbed if only one of its members has to take to crime through being in need, and its representatives can declare with a quiet mind, publicly before God, “in our nation no person need turn to crime on account of being necessitous,” this triumph of the laws of rights and brotherly love taught by God in the Torah is such a great one that it ennobleth retrospectively all the past generations out of the roots of which they have grown.

4. Martha Nussbaum, *Anger and Forgiveness: Resentment, Generosity, Justice*

See concept of “transition anger”.