

THOUGHTS ON CONFESSION, THE COMMUNITY, AND THE INDIVIDUAL

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I. THE DAYS OF AWE – DAYS OF COMMUNITY?

Babylonian Talmud Berakhot 58a

תנו רבנן: הרוֹאֶה אוֹכְלוּסֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, אוֹמֵר: "בְּרוּךְ ... חֹכֵם הָרָזִים" — שֶׁאִין דַּעְתָּם דּוֹמָה זֶה לָזֶה, וְאִין פְּרָצוּפֵיהֶן דּוֹמִים זֶה לָזֶה.

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

Babylonian Talmud Pesahim 64b

תנו רבנן: מעולם לא נתמערך אדם בעֲזָרָה, חוץ מפסח אחד שֶהָיָה בִּימֵי הַלֵּל, שֶׁנִּתְמַעֵר בּוֹ זָקֵן אֶחָד, וְהָיָה קוֹרְאִין אוֹתוֹ "פֶּסַח מְעוּבִין". תנו רבנן: פַּעַם אַחַת בִּיקָשׁ אֲגֵרִיפַס הַמֶּלֶךְ לִיתֵן עֵינָיו בְּאוֹכְלוּסֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל. אָמַר לֵיהּ לְכֹהֵן גָּדוֹל: תֵּן עֵינֶיךָ בְּפִסְחִים. כָּטַל כּוֹלֵיא מִכָּל אֶחָד, וְנִמְצְאוּ שָׁם שְׁנַיִם רִיבּוֹא זֹגִי כְלִיּוֹת כְּפָלִים כְּיוֹצְאֵי מִצְרַיִם. חוץ מִטֵּמָא וְשֶׁהָיָה בְּדֶרֶךְ רְחוֹקָה. וְאִין לֹךְ כָּל פֶּסַח וּפֶסַח שְׁלֹא נִמְנוּ עָלָיו יוֹתֵר מִעֲשָׂרָה בְּנֵי אָדָם. וְהָיָה קוֹרְאִין אוֹתוֹ "פֶּסַח מְעוּבִין".

Our Sages 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".

Our Sages taught: Once, King Agrippa wished to set his eyes on the multitudes 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 crowds".

II. CONFESSION AS TRIUMPH

Babylonian Talmud Yoma 86b

אָמַר רִישׁ לָקִישׁ: גְּדוֹלָה תְּשׁוּבָה שֶׁזְּדוֹנוֹת נַעֲשׂוֹת לוֹ כְּזָכוֹת

Reish Lakish said: Great is repentance, for [even] one's intentional sins are then accounted as merits.

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

וב"ל דמה"ט נמי מנהג ישראל לשיר את האשמנו ביו"כ -- והרי קינה מבע"ל! אמנם הוא לרמז שכולם נתהפכו לזכיות, וראוי לשורר עליהם כעל זכיות.

It seems to me that this [the idea, previously noted, 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.....

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.....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....”

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.

III. ON THE OTHER HAND: A CAUTIONARY NOTE ON COMMUNAL TRIUMPH

Psalm 89:21, 29, 31-34, 36

מִצָּאתִי דָוִד עַבְדִּי בְּשֶׁמֶן קֹדֶשׁ מִשְׁחָתִיו:.....לְעוֹלָם (אֲשֶׁמֶר) לֹא חֲסָדִי וְיִרְתִּי נִאֶמְנָת לֹא:
.....אִם יַעֲזֹבוּ בָנָיו תּוֹרָתִי וּבְמִשְׁפָּטִי לֹא יִלְכוּ: אִם חֲקֹתַי יַחַלְלוּ וּמִצְוֹתַי לֹא יִשְׁמְרוּ: וּפְקֻדָּתִי בְּשֶׁבֶט
פֶּשַׁע וּבִגְעָעִים עֲוֹנָם: וְחֲסָדִי לֹא אֶפִּיר מֵעַמּוֹ וְלֹא אֶשְׁקֶר בְּאַמוֹנָתִי:.....אֶחָת נִשְׁבַּעְתִּי בְּקֹדֶשׁ
אִם לְדָוִד אֶכְזָב:

I have found David, My servant; anointed him with My sacred oil.

I will maintain My steadfast love for him always; My covenant with him shall endure.

If his sons forsake My Teaching and do not live by My rules;

if they violate My laws, and do not observe My commands,

I will punish their transgression with the rod, their iniquity with plagues.

But I will not take away My steadfast love from him; I will not betray My faithfulness.

I have sworn by My holiness, once and for all; I will not be false to David.

IV. INDIVIDUAL ATONEMENT: AN “ANTI-BEDIKAT HAMETZ”

Nahman of Bratzlav, *Likkutei MoHaRaN* 1:282 (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.