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News

Parashat Tzav 5780

Rabbi Charley Baginsky – 3 April 2020

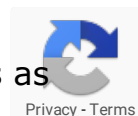
Feeling Guilty

Throughout the generations, perhaps only paused by our current circumstances, we have joked that the most common disease transmitted by Jewish mothers was guilt!

But how much truth is there in this statement. Jewish guilt has been the subject of humour for centuries, but if we try and examine it how would we define it?

Dr Joshua Halberstat claims that Jewish guilt is a myth, he says: *"There is no credible empirical evidence — I've looked hard and carefully — that Jews feel more unwarranted guilt than others. The hypothesis is of course too amorphous to confirm or disconfirm with reliability; interestingly, however, when it comes to testable mental states such as psychosis, the data suggests that Jews suffer less than average. To be sure, sensitive, reflective individuals are discomforted when they disturb the traditions, the communities and the families to whom they feel attachments. This is true of Jews... and everyone else."*

I am not sure that he is right, I have no empirical evidence and I do not work extensively with other communities enough to argue that there are distinctive elements of Jewish guilt. But, at very least, the perception is that Jewish guilt is as



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much part of our psyche as chicken soup.

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Abraham Twersky writes: "*Guilt is to the emotions what pain is to the physical body. Physical pain is very useful and beneficial. Without pain we would not know that we have touched a flame or dropped something heavy on our foot. When a person is whole emotionally doing this which we know are wrong cause us guilt. The pain we call guilt lets us know that there is something which we ought to stop doing. There is guilt which is founded in morals and conscience. That is healthy guilt. Guilt which lacks foundation is not healthy and needs to be dealt with.*"

In other words whether as Jews we feel more guilt than others is irrelevant what is most important is whether Judaism teaches us anything about how to deal with the guilt we feel – either for genuine or imagined reasons.

This week's *parasha* is called *Tzav* and is one which tells us in almost excruciating detail about the sacrifices. While the days of sacrifice have long passed and none here would choose to return to them, I believe what they represent can be helpful. The *olah* – coming from the root to ascend, is about rising up to meet God, an acknowledgement that while we must seek repentance from our fellow human, the *chatat*, the sin offering, acknowledging that we have done wrong, the *asham* the offering that makes reparation. These are not sacrifices for intentional sins against another person for they cannot be removed by sacrifice rather they are for all the unintentional sins.

Unintentional sins, I envision these as the things that keep us awake at night, the things we cannot let go, that eat away at us and require closure. We are living through the ultimate of liminal periods, where uncertainty itself defines our borders, we have no idea when it will end – we are suspended without closure.

The last sacrifice that we see in *Tsav* is the one of well being. This sacrifice seems designed to bring healing to those who feel guilt and return the individual to a state of shalom – wholeness.

I am not suggesting that isolation has already curdled my brain and that I now am advocating a return to animal sacrifice. I also know that prayers have replaced sacrifice, not only from an ethical and practical view but also in the way in which they are designed to work. But thinking about sacrifice can remind us of what lies underneath the prayers and what their purpose is. The word for sacrifice in Hebrew

is **KORBAN** – and comes from a root meaning drawing close, intimacy. Arguably
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then prayer is not about placating God, but rather a means to let go of the things
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In isolation I have become acutely aware of guilt. I seem to feel permanently guilty and speaking to colleagues and friends I am not alone. Guilt takes on a multitude of forms, guilt for not being there enough for my now homeschooled children, guilt that I am not creating new adventures and teaching them three new languages simultaneously, guilt that I am not working enough or am working too much, or not in the right place or supporting others enough. I feel guilty that we do have a garden and enough to eat and I have my kids with me and still have a job, and then I feel guilty that sometimes I still feel very alone.

Time and time again I find myself returning to the American educator Rachel Levin who tells this great story of being asked what were the most important words anyone could ever need and being told 'This too will pass'. She remembers telling her dad that this was ridiculous and why would anyone ever tell someone – for example on their wedding day – this too shall pass. Her father explained patiently that it was exactly these people, who knew their wedding day would pass and it was the marriage that counted, whose relationships would survive.

She tells how those those words had not only sustained her through every awful occasion, but also made her appreciate life. As a stressed mother of two they reminded her, as she held her children tight and thought about throwing them off her lap to answer the phone and do all the things she had to get done, that this moment would also pass and she needed to be in it before they were no longer there to enjoy.

As we hang on for this to pass, be kind – not only to others but to yourself. Ditch the guilt, throw it into your prayers. Do not try and be a superhero or imagine that you will be fluent in Portuguese or ready for the Bake Off final, become the new Banksy or have turned your child into a genius.

Be in the moment, try and find the simplest joys if that is only to rediscover time and change of pace, because please God very soon this too will pass.

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