

Kol Nidrei Reflection 5782

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The phrase “collective t’shuvah” has been on my mind. On Yom Kippur, we merge the deeply personal with the communal when we confess our sins together by chanting the *Vidui* and the *Al Het*. No one in the congregation has done everything on the list, but at least one person has probably done each of them. We confess as a community so that no one has to face their sins alone. This can also be true of t’shuvah.

It’s not easy to admit that our ancestors or our leaders have done wrong. It’s even harder to face the ways that we may have benefitted from those actions. But we cannot possibly achieve *heshbon hanefesh*, an accounting of the soul, without including the sins we have inherited. For example, because my grandparents were white, they were able to apply for Federal Housing Administration loans that were not available to people of color. They used those loans to participate in white flight to the suburbs and systemic disinvestment from communities of color. I am the beneficiary of generational wealth and cultural capital that was intentionally withheld from Americans of color.

Another example is the way that I benefit from the use of non-renewable resources without having to confront their true cost. I was born into a world of convenient single-use plastic, cheap gas and meat, and computers that become obsolete after a few years, but I didn’t face the health risks of living near a toxic waste dump or a factory farm. I didn’t have to breathe smog or burn electronic waste over an open fire to reclaim the rare Earth metals inside. Even now, living in Madison, while we face some impacts of climate change, my life and my home are not directly threatened by sea level rise, or wildfires, or hurricanes.

My life is marked by an astounding amount of privilege. But having privilege is not a sin in and of itself. I have seen people be consumed by their guilt at having privilege, to the point where it paralyzes them and keeps them from action. How fortunate we are, then, to have this tradition of collective *vidui*, or confession. We can share the burden of acknowledging that we are complicit in the great calamities of our time, without losing ourselves in shame and rage. We can recommit to our deepest shared values, and move from confession to action in the new year.

In the last 18 months, we have witnessed the awesome power of collective action. Collective action can do great good, as when hobbyists sewed emergency cloth masks for hospitals, or when people all over the world took to the streets to protest police violence. But we have also seen collective action as a force of great evil, as when insurrectionists stormed the United States Capitol or when people have rallied in opposition to vaccination.

In 5782, may our collective action be a force for good and healing in the world. G’mar hatimah tovah.