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Yom Kippur Morning
September 16, 2021

Collective Teshuvah: Taking Responsibility for Past and Present Injustices

A couple years ago I was asked to speak at a conference on Jewish ethics organized by the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College. Some of the participants were rabbis. Others were scholars. My panel focused on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. After the conference we were invited to submit our papers for publication in the *Journal of Jewish Ethics*. This was certainly not what I was trained to do, and I wasn't particularly excited about it, but I'm a rule-follower, so I did my best. After a very long peer review process, the comments came back. I could summarize them in one sentence: "You write like a rabbi, not like a scholar."

"Well, I could have saved you the time reading my paper and told you that in the first place," I thought.

This seemed like a good time to back out of the whole process altogether. I certainly don't need to be publishing scholarly articles for my career. And, like two people are ever going to read it, so why bother?

For good measure I called the person who organized the conference. The thing was, she really wanted me to submit the article. She told me that plenty of rabbis had submitted pieces like mine.

So I agreed. I got a little help from friends who are historians. I formatted my footnotes perfectly. I googled how many words are supposed to be in an abstract. I learned how to choose effective keywords.

The article got published. Its basic argument is that as American Jewish support for Israel crumbles, American Jews need a new Jewish ethical framework in which to understand and respond to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It needs to extend the discourse beyond a Jewish narrative and examine the values of empathy and responsibility towards Palestinians, as well as recognize historical injustices perpetrated by Israel.

Of the maybe two people who read the article, one wrote me back a long email with her comments. She took issue with my core argument that *collectively* Jews are responsible for the oppression of Palestinians. She said that while she is heartbroken that the oppression of Jews resulted in the oppression of Palestinians, she herself does not feel personally responsible for any wrongdoings committed by the State of Israel.

Her email made me think about the concept of collective responsibility, and on Yom Kippur the concept of collective teshuvah – meaning that together, we are obligated to acknowledge our wrongdoings *as a people* and do repair.

I wonder: What ways are we – or aren't we – responsible for the actions of other people? As a people, or a society, or as a nation? As Jews? As Americans? If we did not directly commit the action, are we still responsible? How do we engage in a meaningful and effective teshuvah process? When so many lives are broken, what does it mean to repair?

I believe that American Jews do have responsibility to examine our people's actions towards the Palestinian people throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The history is complicated, and people on all sides were desperate. Jews and Palestinians experienced displacement, violence, and atrocities. But the Israeli government and Israeli people were and are responsible for so many actions that should be accounted for. And because the American Jewish community has unequivocally supported Israel for so many years, and because American Jews benefit from our connections to a Jewish state – for example, young Jews can receive free trips to Israel or Jews of any age can become Israeli citizens, and because the Israeli government claims to speak for all Jews, we, as an American Jewish community, are also responsible.

To be responsible does not make us horrible. It does not mean that we should be demonized or that repair is impossible. It means that when we are presented with complex situations, we don't always have the full understanding of the experience of others. Our needs often conflict with their needs. And sometimes we ignore other people's needs – we may act in ways that are hurtful and harmful and cause real damage. When that happens, we have an obligation to address that harm.

We usually think of teshuvah on an individual level. *I* have let someone else down. *I* have hurt my neighbor, betrayed my friend, deceived my sibling. But the liturgy of the High Holy Days is in the plural. There's *Al cheyt shechatanu lefanecha* – For the wrong *we* have done before you. And the Ashamnu: "*Ashamnu, Bagadnu, Gazalnu… – we* have trespassed, *we* have dealt treacherously, *we* have robbed, and on and on." We acknowledge that together we have committed the sins of neglect and apathy and disregard for others. We do this as a community, as a people, as a society, and as a nation.

The Book of Jonah, traditionally read on Yom Kippur afternoon, is one of the best examples we have from Jewish tradition of collective teshuvah. God calls out to Jonah to go to the city of Nineveh and demand that the people stop committing injustices towards each other. Jonah shirks this responsibility – maybe he feels apathetic, or he's too busy, or the work is too difficult – so he runs the other way. Jonah tries to flee from God and boards a ship for Tarshish, but one thing leads to another and the sailors throw him overboard. He is swallowed by a great fish, and while he's in the fish's belly he repents and agrees to go to Nineveh.

Jonah proclaims to the people of Nineveh that they must do teshuvah for the great injustices they have committed. The people listen, the King gets on board, and they actually do it. We

don't know whether it was difficult, or who refused, or what the experience felt like, but they engage in a real process.

Collective teshuvah is obviously different in our world. We don't have a God or a king who is commanding us to behave in certain ways. Often collective teshuvah is voluntary. But Jonah is an important story in that it's woven into the fabric of our tradition and sets the expectation that collective teshuvah is not only possible but essential.

My friend, Rabbi Margaret Holub, has spent extended time in South Africa. The first time she went was just a few years after apartheid was abolished, and Nelson Mandela became President of a multiracial government. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was in full operation. She notes that it was an incredibly moving process for perpetrators to face their victims, confess their crimes, and apologize for their actions. But she writes:

> Over the years I, like all of us, have seen the situation in South Africa harden and polarize since those hopeful times. And I have come to understand that civic repair calls for more than atonement. There has to be repair.
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> The squalor in which the vast majority of Black Africans live had to be redressed, and it still has not been to any significant degree. As enormous a task as it was to bring victims and perpetrators together for moral accounting of crimes of apartheid, it is a still greater task to repair the material inequality that apartheid induced. It would require those who profited for generations from the criminal regime to give up their control over the resources that they had commandeered.

The Truth and Reconciliation process in South Africa mirrors many steps in the traditional teshuvah process. I don't know of any modern examples that follow the process exactly, but we can imagine what that might look like.

In a traditional teshuvah process we have to first express regret for our actions, sincerely and not perfunctorily. Without feeling remorse, true healing becomes far more difficult.

Next, we have to renounce our actions and reject our past behavior. This is not the time to rationalize or make excuses for what we have done.

Then, we confess our wrongdoings out loud. We face the people we have harmed, confront the consequences of our actions, and allow them to express their own emotions.

Only then can we begin to reconcile. We offer a sincere apology. Often forgiveness comes slowly, and people need to talk through what they experienced before they can grant forgiveness.

After that, we make amends. We can offer financial compensation or try to find some other way to set things right. It's not always clear what is to be done, but we need to make a real effort, listen closely to those whom we've harmed, and respond to their needs. What's

important is that we step up – beyond words – and take action. *Without repair*, there can be no teshuvah.

Lastly, we resolve not to do the offense again. The process of teshuvah is truly complete when we are presented with another opportunity to commit the wrongdoing, and we decide not to do it.

When we confront the legacy of racism against Black Americans in our country, and especially the historic injustice of slavery, so too do we need a process for collective teshuvah. The critical step of making amends could take the form of reparations. My colleague, Rabbi Ari Lev Fornari, quotes the Movement for Black Lives, which asserts:

> The government, responsible corporations and other institutions that have profited off of the harm they have inflicted on Black people — from colonialism to slavery through food and housing redlining, mass incarceration, and surveillance — must repair the harm done.

He then continues:

> In this demand I see an essential aspect of the nature of reparations. Those who have profited are responsible for the process of repair. In Jewish tradition, we would call this *teshuvah* — a process of reparations and restorative justice.

Collective teshuvah is a difficult concept, especially for injustices perpetrated in the past, because many people do not believe that they bear any responsibility. They were not alive at the time of slavery and they did not commit the racial injustices throughout our society. Many white Jews would argue that their parents or grandparents immigrated to the United States in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century, so it wasn't even their ancestors who were responsible. "Other people committed the sins," they reason, "so why should we have to do teshuvah and pay reparations?"

The answer is that no teshuvah has been done – no wrongs have been addressed and no amends (such as reparations) have been made. As a society, we owe this debt to Black Americans living today. And even more than that, those of us who have white skin benefit daily from the privileges bestowed by that whiteness. To correct historic and present injustices, a *complete* process of teshuvah – with all its steps – must occur.

I don't know what a real process of collective teshuvah would look like in regards to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and it feels as if we are nowhere near that point. But we should thoughtfully and honestly examine the teshuvah that Palestinians have called for, which is the Right of Return so that refugees can return to their homes or receive compensation.

Even before that, though, we could begin by engaging with Palestinian narratives on their own terms. While it may be difficult for American Jews to acknowledge and fully grasp the Palestinian experience, we must not turn away from Palestinian suffering. We must recognize

that the Palestinian past and present is steeped in trauma and loss. We must view Palestinians not as a footnote to the Jewish experience or an impediment to our own historical narratives, but that our stories and experiences are deeply intertwined. That could be the first step in taking responsibility for historical injustices.

On this Yom Kippur, let us embrace the concept of collective teshuvah. Let us take responsibility for past and present injustices. And let us not forget that Jewish tradition obligates us to not just express regret, renounce our actions and reject our past behavior, confess our wrongdoings out loud, and resolve not to do the offense again.

These are critical, necessary steps, but they are not sufficient unless – and until – we repair what is broken.

Gmar chatimah tovah.