

When I was in high school, I performed in my school's production of *The Pajama Game*. (I played Hines, the time study man, if you must know.) One of the show's big numbers is Once a Year Day, when all of the pajama factory's employees enjoy their annual company picnic. "This is our, once a year day, once a year day," everyone sings out for joy. It's the one day a year when they set aside their usual pursuits of stitching pajamas and do something entirely different.

Yom Kippur is our people's Once a Year Day. Although this year, it felt like many of us spent months wearing masks like it was Purim, and cleaning like it was Passover, every holiday actually only comes once a year. Each Jewish holiday is a sacred moment with its own themes, practices, and special foods.

But Yom Kippur is different, and not only because there's no special foods to anticipate. Using a phrase found nowhere else, the Torah describes Yom Kippur as occurring once a year<sup>1</sup>. When I heard that phrase last year during the Yom Kippur Torah reading, it struck me as odd. Of course Yom Kippur is only once a year. Every holiday is. So why does the Torah, which does not waste words, specifically draw attention to that, both in this morning's Torah reading, and in one other place as well?

To my surprise, the great commentators of the past did not address this question. But I want to share with you my own theory about why the Torah seems to go out of its way to emphasize that Yom Kippur is only once a year.

Yom Kippur is an intense day. At the core of Yom Kippur is confession, the act of verbalizing our misdeeds. This is an indispensable step in the process of teshuva: acknowledging that we have done wrong, against others and against God. Confession is necessary, but it can become harmful. Without limits, focusing on all the ways we need to do better can leave us thinking poorly of ourselves. It can give us as much of a warped self-image as thinking that we are perfect and do not owe anyone any apologies.

For many people, Yom Kippur can feel almost cruel. Such people do not need a clever alphabetical list in the mahzor to articulate all of their shortcomings. Their brains do this all on their own constantly. "You're not good enough... you're a failure... you can't get anything right...you might as well give up," say the voices in their heads. Every day feels like Yom Kippur. Every moment feels like a trial.

While anxiety and depression can intensify this negative self-talk, many people still tend toward evaluating themselves too harshly. We all have our moments of low self-esteem, where we feel like frauds and failures. We all have moments when we look around and wonder: just what have I made of my life?

I think the Torah, in its wisdom, knows that the process of acknowledging failure and purging it from our lives can be this intense. I think the Torah knows the human tendency to be down on ourselves disproportionate to whatever harm we have actually done. And I think the Torah also

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<sup>1</sup> Exodus 30:10; Leviticus 16:34

knew that some portion of us sometimes go through life imagining that we have done nothing wrong and whatever happened is all somebody else's fault.

In response to this does the Torah instruct that we go through a process of self-examination, self-denial, and renewal precisely once a year. Anything less would enable the fantasy that we have nothing to apologize for. Anything more would trap most people in a feeling of their own worthlessness.

But precisely once a year, on the tenth day of the seventh month and at no other time, do we set aside our daily tasks and our bodily pleasures to do that excruciating work of self-examination, purification, and return, as we head into the next year. This work is necessary for spiritual growth, but is only productive within limits. And that is precisely why the Torah goes out of its way to set limits on it.

And yet, today is Yom Kippur. Today is that one day on the calendar when we *do* set aside time to engage in that work of acknowledging where we need to improve, without letting it overwhelm our sense of self and the value we each inherently bring to the world. I would like to address two areas in particular where getting this balance right seems especially necessary.

The first is what some call "Jewbarassment," or the feeling of inadequacy when it comes to Jewish practice and culture. Archie Gottesman, a marketer and activist, coined this term and founded the organization JewBelong, which uses cheeky advertising and accessible Jewish resources to counter that feeling.

The longer I've served as a rabbi, the more I notice how pervasive this feeling is. At times I even feel it myself, when I encounter entire areas of Jewish thinking and practice with which I only have a passing familiarity. Like any wisdom tradition that has been around for a while, Judaism is sprawling, complex, and nuanced. There's enough here to keep anybody busy for a lifetime. We Jews specialize in multiple, complex answers to life's deepest questions. And that's before we even get to the language barrier that keeps so much of Jewish thinking and practice behind closed doors--although this too is changing rapidly.

So Jewbarassment is real. I encounter it when people sheepishly apologize to me for their infrequent synagogue attendance, lack of Hebrew skills, or unkosher diets, as if those things alone were the measure of an engaged Jewish or spiritual life. You may experience it yourself when you encounter something Jewish that you feel like you should know, but are too embarrassed to ask. Or when you enter a Jewish space where subtle differences between "insiders" and "outsiders" create a very unsubtle barrier to entry. This embarrassment itself can become a barrier to entry. No one, especially not highly educated adults who are used to feeling competent, likes to feel inadequate. As Pirke Avot teaches, an embarrassed person cannot be expected to learn.

Here too we need a balance. We need that sting of conscience to motivate us to deepen our Jewish knowledge and practice over the course of our lives, to keep learning and growing as Jews. But we cannot let that sense of inadequacy overwhelm everything else, such that we

come to define our Jewish identities negatively, by what we do *not* know and what we do *not* do, rather than positively, by what we enthusiastically know and do.

And on the communal level as well, we need to balance lowering the real and perceived barriers to entry of Jewish life, with preserving the core ideas, texts, and practices our people have sustained for millennia. This is not simple and at times involves painful compromise between the demands of the past and the future. It can be hard to know when lowering expectations serves the cause of access, and when less is just less.

Nonetheless, the bigger point here is that we need not feel embarrassed by wherever we stand Jewishly. Rather, we can feel proud of where we are and what we do, while also using the gift of Yom Kippur to prompt us to strive for better and deeper. As I often say, when it comes to our Jewish lives, just as with anything else, we will get out as much as we put in.

That feeling of Jewbarassment is not particular to this year. But there is another area where we need to get the balance right, between guilt or embarrassment and self-esteem, that is particular to this year.

As we look back on the ways we each responded to the pandemic, and to this period of shutdowns and distancing, there is quite a bit we might feel embarrassed or guilty about. We might feel embarrassed that we did not emerge from isolation having written the next great novel or in the best shape of our lives or having completed some other self-improvement project. We might feel embarrassed that we did not run a tight ship where our children were perfectly cooperative and thrived on distance learning. Or, we might have a survivor's guilt for being basically OK, while so many others have lost livelihoods, relatives, or homes.

So much of this embarrassment and guilt comes from comparing our lives to others'. While this has long been a human tendency, social media has intensified it. We compare our own unedited lives to the highly scripted presentation others put on social media, and end up feeling badly about ourselves. I experienced quite a bit of this in the last few months as I saw on social media how other rabbis were responding to the pandemic and preparing for these holidays. I got a few good ideas out of it, but I mostly just felt badly about myself in comparison to them. This did nothing to make me a better rabbi or person. It even stymied me in moments when decisive action and work were called for.

So here, too, do we need that balance. The idea is not to compare ourselves favorably or unfavorably to what we think other people are doing or experience. Rather, our task is to compare ourselves with our own sense of how we would like to lead our lives. And part of that project might be a healthy guilt that emerges from the realization that our actual lives and our deepest values are misaligned. A little bit of guilt can motivate us to take advantage of the opportunities this situation creates for helping others or finally getting around to long-contemplated goals.

But at the same time, we also need a generous helping of self-compassion in this unprecedented moment. We need to tell ourselves that sometimes just getting through the day

is an accomplishment, and that it's OK to curl up with ice cream and a silly movie every so often. We need to tell ourselves that this has been an extraordinarily stressful situation and it's reasonable to not always have been on our best behavior during it. We need to remember that no one signed up for this and that the pandemic is not our fault. And then, rather than getting stuck in our own guilt, we can express gratitude for our blessings by using those gifts to help others.

So, in these times as always, we need a healthy amount of guilt balanced out by self-compassion, a desire to be and do better, with an appreciation for how good we already are. This once-a-year-day of Yom Kippur offers us just such an opportunity, limited to precisely once a year, to engage in this work.

A problem arises, though. Many Jews' highest contact with Judaism comes around these holidays, with their serious themes. Without the balance provided by living the rest of the Jewish year as robustly, it is understandable to walk away with the impression that Judaism is about feeling guilty for your sins, and groveling for mercy from a vindictive God.

While it is true that confession is an essential aspect of Yom Kippur, Yom Kippur is not only about feeling guilty. Rather, Yom Kippur, from its earliest iteration in the Torah, is about purging that feeling of guilt. It is about return, renewal, and the opportunity to do better. It is about reaffirming that change is always possible--that's the message of the Book of Jonah--and that every life is inherently worthwhile, first and foremost your own.

Despite this, there can still be something out of balance in our experience of Yom Kippur. In response to this, the great Rav Kook, the mystic and first chief rabbi of pre-state Israel, suggested that it is a worthwhile practice to not only confess one's sins, but also one's mitzvot or positive deeds. The intense self-examination of this season and this singular day should involve both appreciating where we have succeeded, not only where we need to improve.

Indeed, many people find it easier to list off their negative qualities than their positive ones, as I mentioned earlier. To correct this, Rav Kook suggested, we should confess our positive deeds and not only our negative ones. We need to remind ourselves of all the things we've done right.

Rav Kook's model for this was the confession that the Torah commands be recited over the tithes that every ancient farmer would bring as gifts to the Temple and as support for the poor. These farmers would affirmatively state that they had followed the laws governing the tithes, and in that sense confess that they had done a mitzvah. Such a confession of mitzvot enables people to give themselves positive reinforcement, which makes it more likely that those good deeds would continue.

Some have taken this idea even further and written confessions of mitzvot in the same form as the Ashamnu, the short alphabetical confession of sins that is a centerpiece of Yom Kippur. For instance, Rabbi Avi Weiss, a prominent Open Orthodox rabbi, suggests that in addition to

Ashamnu, we recite: *ahavnu, beirachnu, gadalnu, dibarnu yofi*. “We have loved, we have blessed, we have grown, we have spoken positively,” and so on<sup>2</sup>.

I must admit that I have mixed feelings about this practice. It diminishes the singularity of Yom Kippur as a day to focus on our failures that I have increasingly come to appreciate. And, I think, it reflects a broader trend in liberal forms of religion to have an exceedingly low tolerance for negative emotions like guilt, sadness, or anger. While I would not mind reciting this positive confession on any other day as part of a gratitude practice, part of me wants to preserve Yom Kippur as a unique day when we force ourselves to stare unflinchingly at the darker regions of our souls.

Nevertheless, I understand the appeal or even the necessity of this practice to help balance out the extremity of Yom Kippur when taken seriously. You can find Rabbi Weiss’s positive confession in your printed materials and I invite you to include it in your individual prayer this Yom Kippur.

Yom Kippur can be a hard day. It is even harder this year without the presence of community to carry us through it. But it is also a gift, a once-a-year day to engage in the powerful work of taking that hard look in the mirror. As part of a year-round Jewish and spiritual life, it offers us just the right amount of guilt to be and do better, coupled with the assurance that change is always possible and no less than God is cheering us on.

A rabbinic teaching suggests that, after the ultimate redemption and the coming of the Messiah, all of the other holidays will be cancelled, but Yom Kippur will exist forever<sup>3</sup>. As long as there are human beings, they will need a day like Yom Kippur, a designated once-a-year day to engage in the difficult work of repair and improvement.

Hayom t’amtzeinu: may this singular day strengthen us. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/ahavnu-beirachnu-yom-kippur-is-also-a-time-to-confess-our-good/>

<sup>3</sup> Midrash Mishlei 9:1