

Kol Nidre 5780  
8 October 2019

### Stepping Across the Line

It was July 30, 1619, in Jamestown, Virginia, that an imperfect experiment in representative democracy began. This year we mark the 400th Anniversary of the Virginia House of Delegates, formerly known as the House of Burgesses [Burjesses]: the oldest continuously elected law-making body in the Western Hemisphere; the legislature where Washington, Jefferson, and Madison once sat. Of course, as students of history, we know that this important anniversary would be wasted if we failed to look critically at our past *and* our present. After all, the creation of the Virginia legislature is not the only significant event that happened in Virginia 400 years ago that played an integral role in the formation and development of our country.

Fewer than four weeks after the first meeting of the House of Burgesses, the first Africans were documented as having arrived on these shores. Their arrival as captives on a slave ship began the horror and atrocity that became slavery in America. We cannot celebrate and build on all that our founders got right without being honest – and continuing to work to repair – all that they got wrong. The very Virginians who conceptualized American liberty and representative democracy – the ones who gave us the maxim that "all men are created equal" – also perpetrated our country's original sins of slavery and the expropriation of native land. Our founders' actions often fell short of their lofty words. And yet their words today ring greater than the flawed men who wrote them. Their ideals continue to inspire us to strive, in each and every generation, "to form a more perfect union."

Today is Yom Kippur. This is *our* moment to reflect on the sins of the past – as individuals *and* as a nation. Every year we arrive at Yom Kippur prepared to pound our chest and percuss our hearts. *Ashamnu, Bagadnu, Gazalnu* – we abuse, we betray, we are cruel. The essence of this day is not the laundry list of sins or the starving of our bodies, it is *one* phrase. This phrase responds to all of our excuses, self-justifications and denials. This phrase is not just a rhetorical addition. It is a radical disjuncture in our thought process, a psychological turning point. Consciously or subconsciously, we spend so much time living the lie that we are blameless, that we are righteous, that we are not really responsible. I will admit, I usually read this phrase as the preamble to the well-known melody that follows. *This* year, I was particularly struck by its candor and critique of our moment. *Aval anachnu v'avoteinu chatanu* – but we, like our ancestors who came before us, have sinned.

On a day that seems so personal, the sins of our ancestors is a recurring theme. Over and over again we will recite the thirteen attributes of God. We know the melody well: "*Adonai Adonai, el rahum v'hannun* – Lord, God, merciful and compassionate, patient, abounding in love and faithfulness, extending kindness for thousands of generations, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin, and granting pardon." Many of us are aware that our liturgy is quoting a passage from the Torah, and that passage continues: "yet God does not remit all punishment, but visits the iniquity of parents upon children and children's children, upon the third and fourth generations" (Ex. 34:7). Yikes! Perhaps it is better left truncated! Nonetheless, for the knowledgeable *davener* (which is now all of you) – we have to contend with what is lurking in the background.

Both of the core liturgical moments this evening – the thirteen attributes and the confessional – underscore the intergenerational impact of wrongdoing. Perhaps now more than ever, this issue is especially salient. Yom Kippur challenges us to seriously grapple not only with our own past but the past that precedes us. It is a reminder of the possibility, and responsibility, to atone for the sins of our ancestors, especially those that continue to affect us today. Slavery, America's treatment of Native Americans, racism, sexism, and more. We must face our false nostalgia which keeps us from moving forward. We *can* do better than the past; that is our responsibility to the future.

Mark Twain once said: "A self-made man is about as likely as a self-laid egg." It goes without saying that we all bear the legacies that we inherit and we all know that our deeds will ripple well beyond the length of our lives. Intellectually, we all know that, but we often don't know it in an operational sense or we choose not to know. Studies show that the rational knowledge of the long-term effects of our behavior seem to be irrelevant to our current decisions. The clearest example is our environment. Why plan for tomorrow when my concern is only for today. That is precisely why masses of young people poured onto the streets on every continent a few weeks ago for a day of global climate protests. They are anxious about their future on a hotter planet and angry at world leaders for failing to arrest the crises. Marching through streets around the world they chanted, "You had a future and so should we!" As Rabbi Tirzah Firestone wrote in *Wounds into Wisdom – Healing Intergenerational Jewish Trauma*, "The mind of the universe observes the wounds of parents as they ripple down to their children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren" (105). If in our personal and national *teshuvah* we fail to take responsibility, for our sins and the sins of our ancestors, we will burden our children and grandchildren, real and metaphorical, with all of the behaviors, character traits, *and* sins that we inherited but failed to heal.

In order to begin the healing process, I would like to suggest that there are two fundamental categories of sins that we need to deal with when we think about our past. The first is the ways in which we ourselves were hurt by our forebears; the ways we were taught beliefs and responses that were limiting or morally wrong; the ways in which we inherited trauma that was inflicted on our ancestors by others. Perhaps you come from a family of addiction, from people who found solace and comfort from what seemed unbearable through alcohol or other substances. You might come from a family of anger or violence, from people who kept score and settled them in ways that were destructive to themselves and others. Maybe your family tried hard to assimilate and fit in, but never quite succeeded, always the "outsider." Maybe you still feel that "outsider-ness" in your own life today. Maybe your ancestors were survivors, having lived through war or other atrocities. Many fought the battles, inner and outer, with those conflicts having been passed on to you. How do we move forward from inherited wrongs? How do we move forward from inherited injury or trauma? Or, put differently, how have wrongs done by or to my forebears distorted who I am? How have wrongs done by or to *our* forebears distorted who *we* are?

The sins of the past inevitably change who we are. As Firestone wrote: "If individual trauma is a blow to the psyche that breaks through defenses with such suddenness and force that one cannot react to it effectively, then collective trauma is a blow to the living organism that is a community. Over time, a trauma-informed worldview may become embedded in the identity of the culture. Because it involves many life experiences, the harm works its way into the

awareness of a group slowly and even insidiously, bringing with it a gradual realization that the social fabric of the community no longer exists in quite the same way, that the body politic, the ‘we’ of the people has been irrevocably changed” (105). How do we need to change in order to repair, heal, and move forward as the individuals and nation that we want to be? What's getting in our way? Are we being honest with ourselves or are we blinded by our own victimhood, weighing the scales of justice in our favor, excusing our wrongdoing?

The second category that we need to deal with is significantly harder. This category relates to actions our parents, grandparents, countrymen, religious group, or ethnic group did to others. Especially, but not only, if we ourselves have benefited. Maybe some of us had a sibling or other family member who was ill-treated or shamed by a parent. Perhaps someone had a learning disability and was treated as ignorant. Perhaps there was abuse in our family that we knew about and stood idly by. Some of us may have inherited wealth that was earned in ways that was harmful to others or to the environment. There are many examples of how our ancestors, whether as Jews or as Americans, had a role in slavery or in fostering extreme economic inequality and poverty. It is worth noting that when we say “God visits iniquity even to the fourth generation,” we are not actually past the point of four generations of slavery in America or the horrors of post reconstruction Jim Crow. Someone alive today, born in the ,30s or ,40s, could well have known a great grandparent born into slavery. We shouldn't be surprised that these sins continue to reverberate, cause harm, and distort our society. How do we move forward from inherited responsibility, atoning for wrongs our ancestors perpetrated toward others? How can *we* be agents of healing?

The task is substantially harder on a national level, not only because our relationships to the wrongdoers are more attenuated, but because it raises the legal defense of vicarious liability. This is especially true when acknowledging our ancestors' guilt involves cost or loss to us. And I am not only talking about dollars and cents. The language of guilt is offensive and off-putting because it triggers our sense of moral injury – an assault to the esteem we have of ourselves as good people. We don't want to see ourselves, our families, our people, or our heritage as morally culpable. It induces great shame. Suddenly, even as we may have benefited from our ancestors misdeeds, we become victims as well. We are also in need of healing. Hopefully our experiences will give us both empathy and courage to get past our own defensiveness. We need to offer more than just “knowing the soul of the stranger.”

I would like to offer four approaches from our tradition that together can help pave the way forward. The first approach is realizing that our actions make a difference, *notzer hesed l'alafim* – they can extend kindness for thousands of generations. For this reason, the father of Modern Orthodoxy, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, connected the word *notzer* – extending – to *netzer* – the bud of a plant. Hirsch taught that the greatest blessing in life is to be a planter of seeds, seeds that will blossom in the future for others. Don't let frustration and disappointment hold you back. Don't cower under the enormity of the challenges before us. Every day brings the possibility of moving the needle forward. Look for opportunities to heal. Plant seeds that will blossom a thousand fold.

The second approach is to draw wisdom from the *egla arufa* – the calf whose neck was broken to atone for a murder when the murderer was unknown. “Our hands didn't shed this blood,” we say. Yet the obligation falls on us to atone for it. As Abraham Joshua Heschel once

noted, “In a free society, some are guilty [but] all are responsible.” We don't have to be guilty of slavery in order to bear responsibility for its ongoing harm. The *egla arufa* acknowledges proximity to harm, the responsibility for failing to prevent harm, and the systemic structures that allow it to happen. In the words of Hirsch: “Whenever, at any time there is a generation that takes it gravely to heart, and is seriously perturbed if only *one* of its members has to take to crime through being in need,...this triumph of...brotherly love...is such a great one that it ennoble retrospectively all the past generations out of the roots of which they have grown.” I am willing to bet your Kol Nidre pledge that the majority of people in this room do not have ancestors that owned slaves in this country. Coming from Eastern Europe, my forebears were not guilty, yet I have acquired responsibility. I concede it is not our fault; it's a situation we have all inherited. Don't take it personally. Just take it seriously. Assuming responsibility helps to lift up our past and has the potential to positively impact our future.

The third approach is perhaps the most challenging. The prophet Isaiah preached: “One who walks in righteousness, and speaks uprightly, who abhors profit from oppression or fraud, who waves away a bribe instead of grasping it, who stops their ears against listening to infamy, and shuts their eyes against looking at evil—such a one shall dwell in lofty security” (33:15-16). In other words, true success comes to those who spurn gain from oppression. This notion sidesteps the whole dilemma of personal versus vicarious guilt and invites us to claim a moral stance now in the present, as a reflection of who we are. This isn't about whether we are guilty of oppressing others. It doesn't matter who the guilty party is. Benefiting from oppression is morally objectionable, even viscerally disgusting. What is the *teshuvah* needed here? How do we experience the fruits of oppression? Are we disgusted by it? Do we even notice it? Heschel once famously said: “If only we would inspect our dollars for blood spots with the same care with which we inspect our eggs.” We must remember that our sense of disgust and delight – our values – don't just happen. They are cultivated and *we* are responsible. A teacher of mine once shared that the commandment to “honor your mother and your father” is really a commandment incumbent upon *parents* not children. It's on parents to behave, model, and parent in such a way that your children *will* honor you. At the same moment that we think about our ancestors and their sins we are also thinking about our own lives and the behaviors we are modeling for future generations. Are we living up to the challenge?

The final approach can be derived from the rabbinic teaching of a house built with a stolen beam. According to our tradition, if a stolen beam is built into a house, restitution for it may be made financially, so as not to put obstacles in the way of penitents (Gittin 55a). When we are dealing with the sins of the past we have to work in the realm of the possible. We cannot be overly punitive or destructive. We have to be forward looking. We must look to build and heal. There are in fact wounds that cannot be healed directly and damages that cannot be fully repaired. Sometimes, it's theoretically possible to repair but practically or politically impossible. If a house is built with a stolen beam it's just not realistic to destroy the entire house. Pay for the value of the beam. Don't see it as all or nothing. Just because there is an inability, unwillingness, or undesirability to demolish the house doesn't mean that atonement is not possible. *And* it doesn't mean that atonement is not necessary.

We are the ones who can heal the wounds of our past, forgive old enemies, shift conditioning and beliefs, and release pain that has held preceding generations captive for centuries. This is the gift we bring them, for as they departed, they left behind the residue of their

unfinished business, passed down through the ages, held in place by the unspoken family agreement to perpetuate it -- that is, up until now. And now it's our turn. Bringing completion to prior generations and setting up what happens for future generations now depends on us. We can take this as a burden and decline to answer the call. This is how the wound keeps reproducing itself. Or we can see this as a gift and an honor, an opportunity to contribute to those we'll never see or know, those who may never know our name. And we can choose to do the work of healing ourselves and our past.

I love how George Bernard Shaw puts it: "Life is no 'brief candle' for me. It is a sort of splendid torch which I have got hold of for the moment, and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to future generations." Our "job" here is to be the light that we already are and reflect that light outward so that others might find their own way in the darkness. The wounds we carry dim the light. As we do the work of transforming our wounds into gifts that help to bring about healing, we literally begin to shine. We become radiant beings, reflecting our true nature, which is our luminosity.

Doing the work of healing takes courage. It's not comfortable, convenient or easy. It's not "business as usual," or maintaining the status quo. It means the end of denial, pretending and avoiding. It means being radically honest with ourselves and those around us. This kind of honesty won't necessarily win popularity contests, but it will recalibrate your DNA. If we're healing and transforming the wounds we carry from those who came before, we're also changing the trajectory of those who come after. Those who follow will have a very different standard as the foundation for their society. If we break the chains of racism and sexism, the fetters of addiction, violence or other inherited limiting beliefs, our children and their children and those who follow them will be given access to possibilities never available to our ancestors. And thus, our entire society evolves.

I conclude with the story of a young girl who dreamed she was standing in front of a long table. Seated at the table was a group of ascended masters who called themselves "The Committee." On the ground before her was a line drawn in the sand. The Committee gave her the following instructions: "If you choose to step across this line, you will take with you your entire family. It's entirely your choice." In the dream, stepping across the line symbolized her choice to evolve as a conscious being. By stepping across, she was bringing consciousness to the generations who came before and after her. She could see them and feel their presence. They were all standing behind her, with their hands on each other's shoulders linked together in a long chain of individuals. She could feel their longings and the unfinished business of their lives. The choice was an easy one, but she needed to declare it. It had to be a conscious step. So the young girl spoke to the Committee and declared, "I choose to evolve on behalf of all my ancestors, for those who came before and those who come after." She stepped across the line, and as she did, she could feel a surge of energy as they all came with her. Then she woke up from her dream.

It is Yom Kippur. The alarm is sounding. And we must all wake up from our dreams. In doing the work of awakening, we're invited to rise up and see what lies beyond the wound, what possibilities await our arrival at the place of conscious choice. What's possible when we live our lives fully embracing ourselves as the magnificent beings we truly are? What's possible for the human condition when we care enough about each other to look upon one another as partners in this cosmic symphony? If we can muster the courage, we can, each one of us and all of us

together, mend this world, mend our families, and mend our very souls that are desperately seeking repair.

I invite you to make this choice for yourself and the thousands of people you represent. Your past and your future are standing behind you. Will you choose to step across the line, do the conscious work of healing and move the chain of individuals in a "thousand generations" with you? *Aval anachnu v'avoteinu chatanu* – but we, like our ancestors who came before us, have sinned. Let us place our hands on each other's shoulders and step across the line, forever changing the trajectory of our lives, our Commonwealth, and our nation, atoning for the past and building a future we can *all* be proud of.