Slichot — Jewish Guilt

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There are a lot of jokes about Jewish guilt. You probably have your favorite. Sometimes guilt is described as the Jewish mother's secret weapon. It used to be Jews and Catholics debating whose guilt is worse, but now sometimes its Jews and Asians competing in the Guilt-Producing Parent Olympics. Classically, guilt was what High Holy Day sermons were supposed to provoke. It seemed like it took my whole childhood for rabbis to figure out that it was not effective to scold people who were there on the High Holy Days because they hadn't been there on Shabbat.

This year I've been wondering about the effectiveness of guilt in general.

When someone offends us, we sometimes wish that, if they won't apologize or make amends, then they at least would feel guilty about it.

But upon reflection, maybe what we really want is the opposite. When I feel guilty about something, it makes me want to avoid it, not wade in further. It might be a person I don't want to confront, or a thought that I want to repress—but avoidance is hardly conducive to *teshuvah.*

Someone half-jokingly suggested that the efficacy of our long confessionals, the alphabetical listing of sins and the *al chet* prayer that traditionally included 44 lines, each with at least two different categories of sin, was that every Jew at the

conclusion could say to themselves, well I'm not really that bad, I didn't do that one.

That may bring us back to the difference between Jewish guilt and Catholic guilt—with Jewish guilt, it's not that you are horrible, it's just that **you could do better**.

The sin offering, according to the commentaries, was not expiation, nor a bribe to the one who commanded us "not to take bribes." It was evidence to the person who brought the offering that he could part with something he owned, that he had a more generous side and could develop that capacity.

The message of the holidays is not just regret, but regret for a purpose. Few of us could join Edith Piaf and say "I regret nothing," but perhaps even fewer use our regrets for something more than sleep avoidance. With the protection of darkness—and traditionally Slichot was said at the midnight hour—we could shake out our regrets, see if some pattern emerged, make amends where that was possible, and then ship our regrets off in one direction while we depart in another.

Jewish teaching is not to wallow in our wrongness, but rather "*Sor meyrah, ve-aseh tov,* Depart from evil and do good," for it is in doing this new good that we get anchored in a different way of living. Rabbi Kalonymos Kalmish Shapiro, a 20th century Orthodox rabbi born in Poland, whose works were saved while he himself was a victim of the Nazis, worried that we spend too much time focusing on not repeating the evil we have done in the past, and not enough time doing the good that we have not yet done.

If a *chet* is an arrow that has missed its mark, then the important thing to remember is that, so long as we are alive, there are still other arrows in the quiver so we must try again.

This year we are so beaten down with the virus, the isolation, the fires, the air . . . is additional guilt at all what we need? Rather let's think of those upbeat melodies with which our sins are confessed. They remind us of the satisfaction of sweeping out the old, so that the new year, with its new opportunities to do good, and new blessings, can emerge.