

Our Super Jewish Power: Utilizing Guilt as Opposed to Shame

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A Super Jewish Hero

I want to start today's Yom Kippur sermon on a bit of a lighter note by talking about a Jewish superhero; no, not Jewish actresses like Gal Gadot who plays a superhero on the big screen,¹ but a super Jewish hero, one who fights for his people against anti-Semites, who brushes off propositions by would-be matchmakers saying "G-d is the only one for me," and who connects with kids by saying "*heivenu shalom aleichem* little brotha...oh, and Shlomo...stay Jewish."² His name is the Hebrew Hammer, and he's on the case to save Chanukah from destruction. And during the climactic battle with his arch-nemesis, when he is faced with sure death, he employs "the most powerful weapon in the Jewish arsenal," the Jewish guilt trip: "I *shlepped* all the way here for this? I come to fight you, and you don't even put out anything to *nosh* on?! What kind of arch nemesis are you!" And he goes on and on, his body radiating with a "guilt-glow" until his arch-nemesis gives up, thereby saving *Chanukah*.³

Now if you can't tell already, this is a ridiculous story, and trust me, if you watch the whole 2003 movie featuring Adam Goldberg as the Hebrew Hammer, you'll likely find something offensive in its profane, un-PC humor modeled after *blacksploitation* films like *Shaft*. But despite the movie's outlandish irreverence, I find the idea of the Jewish guilt trip being the most powerful weapon in the Jewish arsenal, a super Jewish power if you will, to be particularly striking, especially because ***today on Yom Kippur we are using all of our powers to atone for our guilty behavior.***

The Jewish Guilt Trip

Chances are that many of us have been the recipient of or even delivered a Jewish guilt trip. In fact, I wonder if some of you may even be sitting *here* right now, on *Yom Kippur*, because of a Jewish guilt trip...*wait, don't answer that.* In the anthology "*The Modern Jewish Girl's Guide to Guilt*," author Daphne Merkin shares her story of feeling guilty for getting a pedicure on *Yom Kippur*.⁴ She grew up in an orthodox household, the daughter of a rabbi who presided over an Upper East Side synagogue for four decades – a synagogue in which she felt inclined to compete with the "buffed up and lacquered women in the balcony section" simply because she

¹ Wonder Woman, 2017. <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0451279/>.

² Hebrew Hammer, 2003. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tfHuDQi9CU8&t=408s>. Minute 6:50.

³ Hebrew Hammer, 2003. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2y7pzHr2LeI>.

⁴ Merkin, Daphne. "Yom Kippur Pedicure." *The Modern Jewish Girl's Guide to Guilt*, edited by Ruth Andrew Ellenson. New York: Plume Books, 2005.

“felt an inability to figure out where else she might convincingly find a seat.”⁵ In this environment, “Judaism struck her as a resolutely social institution, more about group behavior than wranglings with God or faith.”⁶ ***It was about the rules and not the spirit***, and without the spirit she lived a highly double life – trying to set a good example for her daughter while sneaking pork dumplings on the side. On this particular night of *Kol Nidre*, she could have rushed out of the plush nail salon to make it to *Kol Nidre* on time but didn’t have the *will* to make it happen. And yet, when she returned home and saw her daughter, she cried from the pain that “she’s never been able to locate her inner Jew.”⁷

How many of us have struggled like Daphne to locate our inner Jew? Or for that matter, how many of us struggle with locating our inner *mensch*? And what happens when we’re in the midst of that struggle and someone comes along even with the best of intentions but proceeds to lay on a state-of-the-art, Hebrew Hammer-style Jewish guilt trip that hits you where you’re most vulnerable. It makes you feel small, that if you don’t conform to the demand of the guilt tripper then you are unworthy of their love. However, ***feeling that kind of guilt is not what Yom Kippur is about because that kind of guilt is not really guilt – that is shame.***

Shame vs. Guilt

According to Dr. Brene Brown, a researcher on shame and vulnerability, shame “is the fear of disconnection,” when we experience an “intensely painful feeling...that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging.”⁸ A shame attack ensues when we feel that if we don’t follow through on the demands others place upon us, from as innocuous as not putting a *nosh* out when you’re fighting your arch-nemesis to as serious as feeling you are not as perfect as you should be⁹ or feeling like you’re weak¹⁰ and you’re a failure,¹¹ then we are not worthy of the love of others. Similarly, we shame others when we fear that *they* might disconnect from us. If you’ve ever received a phone call asking you why you haven’t called in a while, that’s

⁵ Merkin, 260.

⁶ Merkin, 265.

⁷ Merkin, 266.

⁸ Brown, Brene. *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead*. New York: Avery, 2012. 68-69.

⁹ “But the real struggle for women – what amplifies shame regardless of the category – is that ***we’re expected (and sometimes desire) to be perfect***, yet we’re not allowed to look as if we’re working for it. We want it just to materialize somehow. Everything should be effortless. The expectation is to be natural beauties, natural mothers, natural leaders, and naturally good parents, and we want to belong to naturally fabulous families” (Brown, 87).

¹⁰ “Basically, men live under the pressure of one unrelenting message: ***Do not be perceived as weak***” (Brown, 92).

¹¹ “When I asked men to define shame or give me an answer, here’s what I heard: ***Shame is failure***. At work. On the football field. In your marriage. In bed. With money. With your children. It doesn’t matter – shame is failure” (Brown, 91).

what's happening; the caller is afraid you're going to forget them so in order to protect themselves from the pain of disconnection, they make you feel bad for not calling, without recognizing that that call causes you to feel shame for not being a good enough child, a good enough grandchild, a good enough sibling, etc. ***When we are fearful we are being forgotten or that we are forgettable, shame attacks us with the harsh voices in our hearts and in our heads to tell us we're not worthy of love and belonging, and since misery loves company we pass that feeling along, often without realizing we are doing so.***

Guilt on the other hand is synonymous with growth. It is built upon a foundation of worthiness as a positive tool¹² to change our behavior when we realize we are capable of doing bad things but we are not bad people. The harsh voices of shame tell us "I am such an *idiot* for doing that thing," whereas the loving voice of God tells us "I can't believe I *did* that thing."¹³ That kind of guilt, the kind that recognizes we can do bad things but we are not bad people, is the kind of guilt we are trying to harness today on *Yom Kippur* to help us atone for our misdeeds, and that is the kind of guilt we are supposed to be beating our chests over during the Prayer of Confession. Yet ironically, a prayer that is intended to help us confess our guilt can often be felt as an attack by the voices of shame because the language of the Confession points toward the need to conform to group behavior more than the opportunity to personally wrangle with God and faith.

Prayer of Confession

The origin of the Prayer of Confession comes from a verse in today's Torah reading in which God commands Aaron, the representative of the people to God, to "confess" (*hitvadah*) all of the collective sins of Israel.¹⁴ Yet, when the Confession first moved into the realm of liturgy where individual Jews could offer their personal confessions, the language was changed from the plural to the singular: חטאתי – I have erred; עויתי – I have sinned; פשעתי – I have

¹² "Guilt is just as powerful as shame, but ***its influence is positive***, while shame's is destructive" (Brown, 72).

¹³ "The majority of shame researchers and clinicians agree that the difference between shame and guilt is best understood as the difference between 'I am bad' and 'I did something bad.' ***Guilt = I did something bad. Shame = I am bad***" (Brown, 71).

¹⁴ Leviticus 16:21:

וְסָמָה אֶהָרַן אֶת־שֵׁתֵי יָדָיו [יָדָיו] עַל רֹאשׁ הַשָּׁעִיר הַחַי וְהִתְוַדָּה עָלָיו אֶת־כָּל־עֲוֹנוֹת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאֶת־כָּל־פְּשָׁעֵיהֶם לְכָל־חַטָּאתָם וְנָתַן אֹתָם עַל־רֹאשׁ הַשָּׁעִיר וְשָׁלַח בְּיַד־אִישׁ עֵתִי הַמִּדְבָּרָה:

Aaron shall lay both his hands upon the head of the live goat and confess over it all the iniquities and transgressions of the Israelites, whatever their sins, putting them on the head of the goat; and it shall be sent off to the wilderness through a designated man.

transgressed.¹⁵ No longer was a single individual required to confess all of the sins of Israel; now we are responsible only for our own sins.

Perhaps it was, to use an anachronism, this egalitarian mindset that moved many early rabbis¹⁶ to innovate new forms of confession, some of which have made it into our Yom Kippur liturgy.¹⁷ Yet what I find most fascinating about these Talmudic confessions is that they are a mix of the plural and the singular, prayers for one another's sins and prayers for our personal sins. It is as if a battle was raging within the spirit of the early rabbis – are we a single unit of Israel responsible for one another's deeds, both good and bad? Or are we individuals who are only required to care for our own mistakes? The battle raged for nearly 500 years but toward the beginning of the 6th century of the Common Era, the plural, acrostic confession called *Ashamnu*, "We have sinned," won the day and stayed strong until it was codified in one of the first siddurim to be produced in the 9th century.¹⁸ **Thus, group confession won out over personal supplication.**

Group Conformity and Responsibility

But just because a prayer is written in the plural doesn't mean it can't help us personally wrangle with God and faith, right? After all, *most* Jewish prayer *is* written in the plural! And perhaps that's part of the point. **Whether it's the *Ashamnu* or the *Barchu*, we may be praying to God, but it is more important that we are praying as a group, and more specifically that we are praying with our fellow Jews.** Think about the Mourner's *Kaddish*, a prayer recited by mourners going through their personal grief but according to Jewish law may *NOT* be recited unless there are 10 adult Jews present.¹⁹ Thus, a mourner's personal yearning to pray to God

¹⁵ "The characteristic prayer of the Day of Atonement is the Confession. This has undergone great changes in form and content. In the Torah it is found in connection with the ceremony of atonement of the high priest (Lev. 16:21); the *tannaim* (1st-3rd centuries CE) discussed the text of this Confession, and they established a text based on biblical usage. **But the simple version arrived at in this way, פשעתי, עויתי, חטאתי, "I have erred, I have sinned, I have transgressed,"** is used only in the description of the service of the high priest in the Temple" (Elbogen, Ismar. *Jewish Liturgy: A Comprehensive History*. Translated by Raymond P. Scheindlin. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1993. 125).

¹⁶ *Babylonian Talmud, Masechet Yoma 78b.*

¹⁷ See "אתה יודע רזי עולם – You know the mysteries of the universe" prior to the Longer Confession.

¹⁸ "Already in *Amram* (*Siddur Rav Amram Gaon* – 9th Century, CE) we find the wording [of the *Ashamnu* confession] in use today; the text is identical in all the rites, though here and there a word or two has been added. This uniformity and the alphabetical acrostic make it likely that the passage comes from the last century of the *amoraic* period (approximately 6th century CE)" (Elbogen, 125).

¹⁹ *Shulchan Arukh Orach Chayim 55:1* –

אומרים קדיש וא"א אותו בפחות מי' זכרים בני חורין גדולים שהביאו ב' שערות וה"ה לקדושה וברכו שאין נאמרין בפחות מעשרה:

They say *Kaddish*, and it is not said with less than ten males, who are free and have grown two [pubic] hairs, and this is the rule for *Kedushah* and *Barchu* that are not said with less than ten.

for the soul of his or her loved one is *inferior* to the need for Jews to conform and show up to minyan. You want to talk about Jewish guilt? Tell your loved one who decided to sleep in that you only had nine people in *shul* that morning.

But it's not just *Kaddish*; many key aspects of our liturgy cannot be recited without a minyan, as if to say that we can't fully express our fidelity to God without showing up together. From there, it's not a far leap to see how the focus on group behavior would lead our sages to say "*Kol Yisrael Areivim Zeh Bazeh* – all of Israel is responsible for one another."²⁰ Or as a medieval *midrash* puts the idea, all of Israel is like one ship, and if there's a hole in one part of the ship, it can sink the whole thing.²¹

One of my memories related to the idea of all of Israel being responsible for one another comes from praying at the Western Wall. I was davening with my *tefillin* on when all of a sudden I felt this stranger's hand yank my head *tefillin*. It was the hand of a fellow *davener* who I never met before who felt it was his responsibility to adjust my crooked head *tefillin* without even asking. Looking back on this moment years later, I have to assume that to this fellow *davener*, my crooked head *tefillin* looked like a hole in the Jewish ship that needed to be plugged, because if it was not plugged then *he* would go down *with* it. Just like when a host fails to put out a *nosh* for his guest, the guest feels responsible for the failure of the host to be the kind of host the guest would have been. ***That's the dark side of all of Israel being responsible for one another; it gives us license to impose our personal values, behaviors, and expectations upon others, without even asking.***

This is what I learned from my experience after reflection years later. But in the moment, all I *felt* was a sense of shame: shame that despite all of my years of putting on *tefillin*, I did not belong with *this* group of *tefillin* wearers; shame that I felt singled out among all of the *daveners* as a failure; shame that despite the Jewish essence of my soul, I was not Jewish enough; shame that I was not enough.

But it does not have to be like this. I am enough. We are enough. And as Jews we are not fated to a life of shaming each other for our mistakes and misdeeds, of making one another feel like we're not enough. Because as God shows us in today's Torah reading, Yom Kippur is about inoculating ourselves against a shame attack; it's about holding

²⁰ *Babylonian Talmud Masekhet Sanhedrin 27b:*

ולא והכתיב (ויקרא כו, לז) וכשלו איש באחיו איש בעון אחיו מלמד שכולן ערבים זה בזה
The *Gemara* asks: **And** are descendants **not** punished for the sins of their ancestors unless they adopt their behavior? **But isn't it written: "And they shall stumble one upon another" (Leviticus 26:37)?** This verse is homiletically interpreted to mean that the Jewish people shall stumble, **one due to the iniquity of another**, i.e., they are punished for each other's sins, which **teaches that all** Jews are considered **guarantors**, i.e., responsible, **for one another**.

²¹ Tanna De Bei Eliyahu Rabbah (10th c.) Chapter 11.

each other with love to remind ourselves that we're enough; and it's about standing together to work off our personal guilt to help us change our bad behavior while KNOWING we're not bad people.

Guilt, Not Shame

Today's Torah reading is taken from the Torah portion named *Acharei Mot*, which literally means "After the death," and in particular it refers to the moment after the death of the High Priest Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu.²² They died as punishment for offering a foreign fire as a sacrifice to God.²³ I think you could imagine what the Israelites might have said about Aaron and his family – "would you look at him? How could he step out here knowing what his family did?! Shame, Shame, Shame!" The stigma of Nadab and Abihu's sin could have been cataclysmic for Aaron's reputation. Yet shortly after their death, Aaron is called by God to offer expiation not just for himself or for his family but also for the sins of the whole people of Israel on the very first *Yom Kippur*.²⁴ Shouldn't the stain of Nadab and Abihu's sins have prevented Aaron from participating in this important ritual? Shouldn't it have acted like a scarlet letter? But no, God wants Aaron to perform this sacrifice as if to say, **"You are enough; I love you, and I am only concerned about helping you do better. Neither you nor anyone else should feel too ashamed to hide their face from Me"**²⁵

I can't emphasize this point enough. Today is a day for guilt in which we recognize our human faults, in which we admit our imperfections and our failures. **But though we are beating our hearts to acknowledge our guilt, it is not a day to beat ourselves up with the harshness of shame.** And the best way to do that is to support one another, to cherish our own vulnerability, and to cherish each other's vulnerability as if it's our own flesh, with a desire for love and connection. *That's* why we pray and confess in the plural; not to transfer our personal expectations to the other but to stand *with* each other. And by standing *with* each other, we just might develop enough trust to invite a few loving souls to help us on our journeys, to acknowledge what we do well instead of picking apart our mistakes, to recognize our strengths

²² Leviticus 16:1.

²³ Leviticus 10:1.

²⁴ Leviticus 16:2-24.

²⁵ A number of *midrashim* point to Aaron's worthiness, even in the midst of his sons committing fateful errors that caused their demise. For instance, after Nadab and Abihu's death Aaron is considered to still be "near" God (*Mekhilta, Beshallah, Shirata*, 8); Aaron's merits "stood up" for his family's errors (Babylonian Talmud Masekhet Yoma 87a); Aaron "set his brother straight" on the right way to interpret the law, even after the deaths of his sons (Leviticus Rabbah 13:1); and out of God's "kindness," God wanted to show the people the truth that Aaron was the elect and his house was the house of the priesthood (Yoma 87a and Bamidbar Rabbah 18:23) (see Bialik, Hayim Nahman and Yehoshua Hana Ravnitzky, editors. *The Book of Legends: Sefer Ha-Aggadah*. Translated by William G. Braude. New York: Schocken Books, 1992. 508:40, 548:116, 706:188 and Ginzberg, Louis. *The Legends of the Jews*. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1947. Volume III. 306).

and how we can use them to address our challenges, and to hold us accountable without shaming or blaming.²⁶ ***That collective will to support, cherish, uphold, and b'ezrat Hashem to ultimately help one another, as we walk on our individual paths of growth together, THAT is our super Jewish power.***

Utilizing Our Super Jewish Power

There will be many more times over the course of today when we will have the opportunity to engage in using our super Jewish power, to stand united together in love as we beat our chests, praying for the willingness to expose our hearts and souls to the possibility of growth. But the traditional plural language our text uses to confess our sins inextricably contains the seeds of a potential shame attack in which we can feel far removed from our inner Jew, our inner *mensch*. That's why to close this sermon on a different kind of lighter note than how I started, I want to take a moment to inoculate ourselves from a potential shame attack with a prayer born not out of our faults but out of our strengths; not out of our failures but out of our successes; not out of our vices but out of our virtues. Just as much as we need on *Yom Kippur* to express a *vidui la-ra*, a confession of our bad behavior to express our guilt, so too – or perhaps even more so – do we need, in the words of Rav Kook, a *vidui-la tov*, a confession of our good behavior to remind us that God created us out of love and so we are worthy of love and belonging.²⁷ So, I invite you to take the handout at your seats, *Ahavnu – We have Loved*, and hold it in your left hand, as you take your right fist and with all of your super Jewish power place these words of shame resiliency²⁸ into your hearts as we pray together...

PRAY אהבנו – AHAVNU – “WE HAVE LOVED” TOGETHER...

גמר חתימה טובה – May we all be inscribed in the Book of Life and Love

²⁶ See Brene Brown's *Engaged Feedback Checklist* (Brown, 204): “I know I'm ready to give feedback when:

1) I'm ready to sit next to you rather than across from you; 2) I'm willing to put the problem in front of us rather than between us (or sliding it toward you); 3) I'm ready to listen, ask questions, and accept that I may not fully understand the issue; **4) I want to acknowledge what you do well instead of picking apart your mistakes; 5) I recognize your strengths and how you can use them to address your challenges; 6) I can hold you accountable without shaming or blaming you;** 7) I'm willing to own my part; 8) I can genuinely thank you for your efforts rather than criticize your failings; 9) I can talk about how resolving these challenges will lead to your growth and opportunity; and 10) I can model the vulnerability and openness that I expect to see from you.

²⁷ Weiss, Avi. “Ahavnu, beirachnu: Yom Kippur is also a time to confess our good. *The Times of Israel*. Oct 6, 2016. <https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/ahavnu-beirachnu-yom-kippur-is-also-a-time-to-confess-our-good/>.

²⁸ Shame resiliency is “the ability to practice authenticity when we experience shame, to move through the experience without sacrificing our values, and to come out on the other side of the shame experience with more courage, compassion, and connection than we had going into it. Shame resilience is about moving from shame to empathy – the real antidote to shame” (Brown, 74).