



## DEVARIM

Ki Tavo - Shabbat Selichot

The True Story Behind Jewish Guilt

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## THE TRUE STORY BEHIND JEWISH GUILT

### ABSTRACT

Jewish guilt is for many an integral component – if not the basis and foundation – of Judaism. After all, how many Jewish anecdotes and jokes orbit around guilt, especially guilt associated with the Jewish mother.

Well, today we shall learn that guilt is antithetical to Judaism and actually undermines the basis of our relationship with the Divine.

And the message couldn't come at a better time, as we prepare for the High Holidays. With the *Selichot* prayers beginning this Saturday at midnight, and today's Torah reading delineating the 98 (!) "curses" which we read in a hush – who wouldn't associate Judaism and the High Holidays with fear and guilt?

But there is a whole other story behind this.

Powerful narratives and anecdotes, with new insights into the nature of sin and confession – all dispel the great myth of Jewish guilt.

### 1. Jewish Guilt

Jewish guilt is for many an integral component – if not the basis and foundation – of Judaism. After all, how many Jewish anecdotes and jokes orbit around guilt, especially those about the guilt dispensed by the Jewish mother.

For example: A son dutifully calls his Jewish mother and inquires after her health. "I don't feel so well," she answers, "I've been very weak." The son says, "Why are you so weak?" She says, "Because I haven't eaten in 5 days." The man says, "He is aghast. "Why not?" She sighs. "I didn't want to answer the phone with my mouth full when you called."

Or: A Jewish mother gives her daughter two warm sweaters as a going away present when she leaves to attend college. When the daughter returns home for her winter break, she is sure to wear one of them to demonstrate her appreciation of her mother's gift. When the daughter walks in the door, the mother takes one look at the sweater and demands: "What's

the matter, the other one you didn't like?"

And finally: A Jewish mother on jury duty was sent home. She insisted SHE was guilty.

Well, today we shall learn that guilt is antithetical to Judaism and actually undermines the basis of our relationship with the Divine.

And the message couldn't come at a better time, as we prepare for the High Holidays. I mean, with the *Selichot* prayers beginning this Saturday at midnight, and with today's Torah reading delineating the 98 (!) "curses" which we read in a hush – who wouldn't associate the High Holidays with fear and guilt?

Isn't Rosh Hashana, the Day of Judgment? Don't we confess our sins many times on Yom Kippur, delineating our sins and beating our chests in contrition? So aren't the High Holidays all about feeling guilt?

The short answer is – surprise, surprise – no.

## 2. Myths and Distortions

I am not sure when and where many of the prevailing myths have crept into Judaism – like the idea of Jewish guilt – but I can assure you that they are distortions nonetheless. How do I know this?

Because we have a Torah, thank G-d, and it is our documented constitution and bedrock which gives us the ability to distinguish between urban legend and fact.

Let's begin with a basic theological point: Why would an Almighty G-d create us all, with flaws and weaknesses, and then want to punish us for our shortcomings? Why would He want us to be trembling in fear and shuddering with guilt over our transgressions? What pleasure could an omnipotent, immortal deity derive from cursing His mortal creatures?

Clearly, there is more here than meets the eye.

## 3. The Merry Cantor

We can appreciate the Torah's unadulterated perspective on "guilt" and "confession" – which negates the conventional stereotype – with a story told by the Baal Shem Tov, the 18th century founder of the Chassidic Movement:

The Baal Shem Tov once visited a town in which the people complained that their cantor behaved strangely. It seems that on Yom Kippur, he would chant the *Al Cheit* confession of sins like a merry melody, rather than like a funeral march most were used to.

When questioned by the Baal Shem Tov, the cantor explained:

“Rebbe, a king has many servants who serve him. Some of them prepare the royal meals, others serve the food, some place the royal crown on the king’s head, others are in charge of running the affairs of the country. Each of them rejoices in his work and the privilege he has to serve and to be so close to the king.

“Now the palace also has a janitor, charged with the duty of removing the rubbish and filth from the palace. The janitor looks at and deals with filth all day. He approaches it, gathers it, and removes it. Do you think that he should be depressed because he is looking at dirt all day? No! He should be happy, because he is also serving the king. After all he is removing the dirt from the king’s palace, ensuring that the palace is beautiful!

“Now, when a Jew sins, he amasses some dirt on his soul. But when he is confessing his sins, it is not the sins, the guilt, the darkness and the negativity that he should be focused on, but on the holiness and beauty of his soul. After all, he is removing the layers of dirt that are eclipsing his soul, and allowing his inner light to shine in its full glory. Is that not a reason to rejoice?”

The Baal Shem Tov was deeply moved by this response, for it captured one of his essential ideas. While other approaches in Jewish ethics and spirituality focus often on the negativity of sin and its dire consequences in this world and even more in the next world, Chassidism – the soul and inner dimension of Torah – focuses primarily on the infinite holiness of every soul and heart.

As the Baal Shem Tov himself once said: “When you look at the earth you can never estimate how many treasures are hidden beneath its crust, so too, when you look at a Jew you can never estimate how many treasures lie beneath his crust.”

#### 4. Curses as Blessings (Optional)

When Rabbi DovBer of Lubavitch was a child, he would listen to the weekly Torah portion as read by his father, Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi. One year, his father was out of town on the Shabbat when the “curses” of Parshat Ki Tavo (today’s portion) were read. After hearing them read by a substitute, the child was so emotionally upset that even a month later his father was unsure whether his son would be able to fast on Yom Kippur.

The child was later asked, “Why were you not disturbed this way when the curses were read in past years?” The child replied, “When father reads it, no curses are heard.”

Yes, it all depends on who’s doing the reading, for we all project our attitudes on others. When “father reads” – the father that see the inner soul even in the darkest places – we hear blessings, not curses.

When “father reads” we feel the joy and excitement of removing the grime from the king’s palace, and beautifying it.

## 5. In Divine Image

This is the true perspective on “sin,” “curse,” “guilt,” “confession,” “judgment” and all the other negative and fear-driven words we project and mistakenly associate with G-d and the Torah especially during the High Holidays.

The real story is this:

We are all created in the Divine Image. Yet, we may wander away from our calling. But even when we do, the Divine Image remains intact, albeit concealed beneath layer and layers of dust other substances. The High Holiday season, beginning with *Selichot* tonight, is about undoing the layers of crust and reconnecting to our core essence.

Part of this process is feeling remorse and regret, but not as an end in itself. Only as a step and a means to correcting our ways and reuniting with our divine souls. Very often, we allow our very human weak instincts to come into play – or others impose their feelings upon us – and poof! we feel guilt. The end result is that we get stuck in that feeling which does nothing to help us grow. It only bring us down and depresses us.

As explained in the *Tanya*, depression and guilt is actually a “sin,” because it demoralizes us and thus is another tool of the *yetzer hora* (the evil inclination), intended to weaken our resolve. Sadness and remorse that motivate us to grow are healthy, but not when they become a force that breaks our spirits.

The formula is simple: Any feeling that demoralizes us is unhealthy and unholy. Any feeling that motivates us is healthy and holy.

## 6. Preparing for *Selichot*

As we prepare for *Selichot* tonight, I would like to share with you another story from the Baal Shem Tov who once sent his students to observe a local innkeeper, in order that they should learn how to prepare for Rosh Hashana.

The students dutifully checked into the inn on Friday before *Shabbat Selichot*. Over that Shabbat they witnessed nothing remarkable. After Shabbat, when it came to midnight and they all went to the local synagogue to recite *Selichot*, they kept their eyes open to see what they could learn from the simple innkeeper. Again, nothing special.

Afterwards they all went to sleep, only to be awakened several hours later by someone praying loudly.

They tip-toed out of their rooms to find the innkeeper fervently reciting psalms. When he finished, he opened up a cabinet and removed two big ledgers.

From one ledger he proceeded to read all his sins of the past year. He confessed that on this and this day he was insensitive to his wife, that on another day he didn't fulfill all his obligations to his community, that he didn't study enough Torah, and so forth.

Then he opened the second ledger, saying to G-d: "These are my failings. Now here's what You didn't do ... I had asked for a better living wage, and You didn't give it to me. My wife fell ill. My children need shoes..."

In the end, he concluded, "Look! I didn't live up to my obligations, and You didn't live up to Yours. So let's call it even. I'll close my book. You close Your book, and we'll start a new year again with a clean slate."

## 7. The Lesson

While that might seem irreverent, what the Baal Shem Tov wanted to teach his students is that the relationship between us and G-d is a partnership. When G-d created us human beings in His image, He invested something divine in us. There is a partnership between us and G-d to make the world a better place. It is as if He founded a business and said to us, "I am the Investor, but you stand behind the counter."

Partners are accountable to each other. And this season is audit time. G-d checks the books to see how we took care of His investment in us.

When we think of it that way, we are not get mired in guilt that does not produce anything constructive. Instead, we are motivated to do better in the new year.

## 8. If Not Higher

I want to end with one more *Selichot* story, which was told by the great Yiddish writer and playwright, Yitskhok Leybush Peretz, otherwise known as I.L. Peretz:

Every year at the time of *Selichot*, the Rebbe of Nemirov would vanish. No one knew where he would go.

The Chassidim believed he was surely in heaven taking care of his important business before the Days of Awe. The Rebbe was surely up there arguing on behalf of Jews and defending them from Satan.

But there was one Litvak in the town. He was a cynic, and he laughed at the Chassidim. The Litvak said that even Moses did not actually go up to heaven, so how could this Rebbe go up to heaven every Friday.

The Litvak took it upon himself to discover where the Rebbe went [in order to expose him and embarrass him]. That [Saturday] night, after *Maariv*, the Litvak snuck into the rabbi's room and hid under the bed. He kept himself awake by reciting passages from the Talmud by heart, all the while waiting to see where the Rebbe would go.

Meanwhile, the Rebbe lay awake all night. The Litvak heard him groaning and moaning and sobbing all night. When the Rebbe of Nemirov groaned he was groaning for all of Israel. So much suffering lay in each groan!

Finally, the Litvak heard the beds in the house creak; he heard people running around and leaving for shul. Everyone in the house left, except the Rebbe.

Then the Rebbe got out of bed. He went to the closet and took out peasant clothes: linen trousers, high boots, a coat, a big felt hat, and a long, wide leather belt studded with brass nails.

Then he picked up an axe.

The Litvak followed the Rebbe to a forest that stood on the outskirts of the town.

The Rebbe entered the forest. The Litvak watched as the Rebbe cut down a small tree and chopped it into a bundle of wood. Then the Rebbe made his way back to town.

He stopped at a back street besides a small, broken-down shack and knocked at the window.

“Who is there?” asked a frightened voice. The Litvaks recognized it as the voice of a sick Jewish woman.

“It is I,” answered the Rebbe in the accent of a peasant.

“What do you want?”

“I have wood to sell, very cheap.” And not waiting for the woman’s reply, he went into the house.

A sick woman, wrapped in rags, lay on the bed. She complained bitterly, “Buy? How can I buy? Where will a poor widow get money?”

“I’ll lend it to you,” answered the Rebbe. “It’s only six kopeks.”

“And who will kindle the fire?” asked the widow? “Have I the strength to get up? My son is at work.”

“I’ll kindle the fire,” answered the Rebbe.

As the Rebbe put the wood into the oven he recited, in a groan, the first portion of the *Selichot*.

As he kindled the fire and the wood burned brightly, he recited, more joyously, the second portion of *Selichot*. When the fire was set, he recited the third portion, and by this time the Rebbe was beaming with joy.

From then on, when another disciple would tell how the rabbi of Nemirov ascended to heaven at the time of the *Selichot*, the Litvak always added, “If not higher.”



## 9. Conclusion

So that is the task before us. To ascend even higher. To always look up, even in our shortcomings. Not to get mired down below in guilt and self-denigration, but to feel a sense of healthy remorse that we have not lived up to our soul's potential.

The Tur writes: “What nation is so great that they have G-d close to it? What nation is like this nation, that knows the ‘personality’ of G-d? The custom of the world is that when you stand in judgment, you don’t know what the verdict will be. But the Jewish people are different. They dress in white and wrap themselves in white, and they eat and drink and celebrate on Rosh Hashana, because they know that G-d will rescue them, and find them innocent and destroy any negative decree.”<sup>1</sup>

Our mistakes ought to become springboards for growth and change, realizing that as G-d’s partners here on earth, we may have not yet completely fulfilled our job. We did not rise to the potential that was invested in us. But also, that this is not the end of the world as long as we can commit to do better this coming year. Not just a commit, but present a cohesive, detailed plan – which G-d is sure to accept and bless.

So we will enter Rosh Hashana, the Day of Judgment, not demoralized and weighed down by guilt and dread, but with the confidence that we will prevail and will succeed in making the world a better place – for us, for our families, for our communities, for the world and for the awakening universe.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Tur Orach Chaim, laws of Rosh Hashana section 581. From Yerushalmi Rosh Hashana 1:3. Yalkut Shemoni Deuteronomy remez 825. See Zohar II 142a: On Rosh Hashana, when the world is judged, every soul hovers and pleads compassion for the living.