

Managing Religious Guilt

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Failure is inherent to human behavior and deeply woven into religious experience. Despite our best efforts to rise above our weaknesses and to transcend our limitations we all, inevitably, fail. Shlomo Hamelech spoke of a tzadik falling and recovering seven times. In general, he was correct, but he grossly understated the number of times we actually fall. We all wish it were only seven.

In the aftermath of religious sin, we experience the heavy but absolutely vital emotion of guilt. Hashem watches our behavior and when we fail, we let Him and ourselves down. A healthy degree of guilt is crucial for religious growth and for moral conduct. Guilt is the quiet whisper of our conscience prodding us to accept responsibility and to improve ourselves. Without this whisper we risk religious freefall. Hashem endowed us with this precious and delicate emotion, providing us an inner compass to navigate our way through the thicket of human failure. Guilt is a tender and authentic moment of religious integrity, gifted to us from Hashem Himself.

But Hashem also expects us to move on from failure, bear our guilt, and find closure. Moving on from guilt is vital for inner emotional equilibrium and is also essential if we are to forgive others and accept their imperfections. If we can't forgive ourselves, it is almost impossible to accept the imperfections and frailties of others. Under the suffocating weight of guilt, we have little generosity of spirit to spare. The people in our lives need us to feel less guilty and more charitable.

Managing guilt is easier said than done, and there are many unhealthy byproducts of imbalanced religious guilt.

Depression from Guilt

Too much guilt can thrust us into dark spaces of depression and despair. Reuven, the bechor of Ya'akov, is a tragic figure in part, because he could not manage his own guilt. Twice he intruded upon his father's marital affairs: once intentionally and once unintentionally, by collecting flowers which would ultimately be bartered by his mother for his father's marital attention. Feeling guilty about these breaches, he cannot muster the inner strength and confidence to decisively

rescue his brother Yosef from being sold into slavery. Low in self-esteem, Reuven's isn't bold enough to rescue his brother, despite his well-intended intervention. Divested of his courage and suffering diminished self-esteem, he cannot act daringly to defy his murderous brothers.

The Torah legislates a chatat sacrifice to help us better recover from sin and better manage our guilt. Notably, the korban is called a chatat or sin-offering but is not referred to as a korban of a sinner. To move on from guilt we must separate between the deed and the do'er. We may have committed a crime but that doesn't make us criminal. Sin and guilt mustn't define us, even as we face the full brunt of our actions and accept the consequences of failure. Committing a sin doesn't make us sinful people.

Accumulated religious guilt can become so overbearing, that the only escape seems to be the abandonment of religion. It is unpleasant to wake up every morning and feel burdened with guilt, and many walk out of religion to liberate themselves from this weight. The albatross of guilt is too haunting, forcing many to just check out of religion entirely.

Religion doesn't mean getting it all right all the time. It does mean accepting Hashem's will and trying to get it all right. Everyone fails, but religious people wake up the day after failure, wipe off the dust and get back into the ring. Guilt is healthy but feeling perennially guilty is not.

Compulsive Religion

Even when religious guilt doesn't spill over into depression, it can wreak havoc with emotional well-being. Religious people feel duty-bound to adhere to religious expectations and to avoid sin. Steadfast dedication to duty and the accompanying dread of failure can lead to neurosis. Obsession with "getting it right" and the panic of possible religious failure can drive us into compulsive religious behavior. We force ourselves into repetitive behaviors or repetitive mental acts to calm our anxiety. Common examples of compulsive behavior include repeatedly washing hands or repeating prayers for fear of missing a few words. In our frantic attempt to avoid guilt we desperately overperform religious duties. Afraid of failure and guilt, we instead become addicted to uncontrollable and harmful behavior.

Even if guilt doesn't cause compulsive behavior, it can still poison the overall taste of religious experience. Guilt-based religion feels heavy and suffocating rather than grand and beautiful. Religion starts to feel dark and menacing rather than radiant and redeeming. It becomes an obstacle course of potential hazards rather than a horizon of opportunity. Preoccupied with fear and dread there is little room in our imagination for spirit and vision. Guilt is crucial for a healthy religious lifestyle, but it must be carefully managed and should not become overwhelming.

Deflecting Guilt

While some indulge too deeply in guilt, others desperately attempt to flee from it. One of the easiest methods of avoiding guilt is to deflect it, blaming someone else or something else for our failures. By blame shifting we transfer guilt from ourselves to other forces. Blaming is toxic to relationships and can even become abusive. Gaslighting is a modern term which describes people who engage in sustained hostile and manipulative behavior. One aggressive form of gaslighting is constantly shifting blame to someone else, making that person feel perpetually guilty, thereby reducing their self-esteem.

Modern cultural influences have made blame shifting easier. Over the past three centuries we have discovered that we are merely small powerless cogs in a bigger engine, at the mercy of forces larger than ourselves. Whether these forces are political, economic or psychological we aren't responsible for our own behavior. Marx asserted that human history was driven by class warfare over the distribution of wealth. Darwin traced human behavior to evolutionary survivalist instincts. Freud suggested that we are driven by dark psychological forces beyond our control, namely our hatred of our father and our desire for our mother. Taken together, Darwin, Marx and Freud relandscaped a world of free choice into an ironclad deterministic world where humans cannot determine their fate or their decisions and are therefore not responsible for their choices or their failures. Someone else or something else is to blame for our shortcomings. Given our lack of agency, guilt just gets in the way of happiness and should be banished. It makes us weak or neurotic, and usually both.

Replacement Guilt

An additional modern strategy for avoiding genuine guilt is replacing it with substitute guilt. White guilt is the belief that privileged races should feel guilty for

global inequalities predicated upon historical injustices. Often this form of political guilt replaces actual moral guilt, freeing people to behave without moral constraint or without personal introspection. After all, if I am consumed with guilt for the underprivileged, I must possess moral integrity. Adopting fake guilt for entire races of oppressed people is a manner of virtue-signaling by which people convince themselves that they are ethical people. Sadly, people become so absorbed with guilt over classes of people they haven't met and don't live alongside, that they don't have time to feel guilty about actual moral and religious failures in their private lives and in their personal relationships. In an age of globalism, political morality sometimes replaces actual moral behavior and white guilt is just one example.

Guilt is one of our most precious emotions and mustn't be ignored or denied. Just the same, overindulgence in religious guilt can deflate our spirit and degrade the quality of religious experience.

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