

2011 Yom Kippur Morning Sermon

This morning we need to ask: What role does guilt play in our lives – as people, as Jews? We need to talk about guilt – where it comes from, how it hurts us, what good it can accomplish for us. We begin by asking: Why is it that we Jews are so universally identified with guilt that, while none of us would ever tolerate expressions of “Jewish greed” or “Jewish clannishness”, we all seem to take for granted reference to “Jewish guilt” – and even use them ourselves.

Perhaps, it's because we are the people who introduced morality to the world – in the form of the Ten Commandments. It was we who first said: “You must not steal; you must not kill.” No wonder we Jews are associated with guilt! By our very presence we remind the world of God's demands on us and our own shortcomings and moral failures. We are also identified with guilt because of our unique history of suffering and persecution. As the world's consummate victims, we remind those around us of what they could have done, should have

done, to protect the innocent. Once again, our mere presence is a rod to conscious and a prod to guilt.

We are finally associated with guilt because our immigrant experience here in America. As with all immigrants, our parents came to this country, willing to sacrifice that their children might have it better than they did. In some ways this was wonderful. We felt valued, affirmed, and worthwhile. But – as with all children of immigrant parents – we soon learned that we could never adequately repay them, could never fully justify those sacrifices. Thus, our parents learned to employ guilt to achieve their ends while we, their children, suffered endlessly under its burden. No wonder Jews appeared to this world as “Experts on guilt.”

Today, however, I’m here to tell you: It is simply not so!

We just have no monopoly of guilt. We are no more “Expert” in it than any other people. So, while Jews bring a message of morality to the world, so do Christians, Muslims, and many

others. While Jews have been victims, so have Armenians, Black Africans, and American Indians. And if Jewish–American Mothers have ladled out spoonfuls of guilt to their children, so have countless others, Polish -, Italian – and Irish American Mothers as well.

The simple fact is Guilt, like any human emotion, is spread randomly through the population – Jewish and Gentile alike. But it does not abide equally in everyone. In fact, I believe that when it comes to guilt the world is composed of two various kinds of people – The “Guilt – ridden” and the “Rid of guilt.” Each is an extreme. Each has its own problems. We need to understand both extremes and free ourselves from the pain that each approach causes.

But it’s usually not so easy. For guilt is pernicious. And it can descend on us in so many different forms. It can come to us when others will not allow us to balance the scales with them, when they do for us but will not allow us to do for them. This is true with friends, spouses, children, but it is especially true

when it comes to parents. Very often, after the death of their mother, congregants tell me about her selflessness, how she did everything for them, never letting them do anything for her in return. But selflessness is a double - edged sword. On the one hand, it is testimony to a parent's love for her children. On the other, it represents a debt that can never be repaid. Now, when grown children tell me their mother was self- sacrificing, I invariably ask: "Was that always good for you?" Then, all too often, the truth comes tumbling forth – a truth full of anger and guilt. How sad! So many of us carry a heavy burden of guilt with us because someone we love will not let us balance the scales with them, will not let us give as well as take.

Guilt can also come to us when we suffer the death of one we love. Then it's easy to find reasons for feeling guilty. We didn't believe him when he said he was sick. We were out of town – sunning in the islands – when she had her attack. Or worse – we never spent enough time with him. We never said to her: "I love you." Then the guilt is overwhelming. And it can last a long time.

Finally, guilt can come to us when we don't live up to the lofty standards, we set for ourselves. We want so very much to be caring, patient, tolerant, and loyal. But we are only human. We get distracted, tempted by personal pain, comfort or convenience. We want to do right- but we seem to fall short again and again. And we will not let ourselves off the hook. We "Know" we are guilty and that we must be punished- even if it means we have to punish ourselves.

Not long ago, a couple asked for counseling because of problems with each other, the worst of which was the husband's lack of physical responsiveness to his wife. After some prodding, he told me, those years before, on a business trip- at a time in his life when he was depressed, confused and vulnerable- he committed an indiscretion. As soon as it was over, he knew it was a mistake. So, he came home and confided everything to his wife. Understandably, there were tears and angry words. Finally, she forgave him. But he never forgave himself. He "Knew" he was irredeemably bad, that he had to be punished. He could not be allowed to enjoy life- he did not

deserve it. And his body sent him that same message every time he got into bed beside his wife. How tragic! His marriage, his self esteem, his joy in life-- all in jeopardy because of an unforgiving guilt that could not be appeased.

My friends, those who are guilt- ridden know how agonizing it can be. We know how it cripples us, depress us, and grind us down. We need forgiveness more than anything else in the world. That is why Jewish tradition gives us this day of Yom Kippur- to escape the guilt, to be forgiven, to begin again. For the guilt- ridden, Yom Kippur is a golden opportunity to step out from under the shadow of our guilt and began the year with fresh hopes and dreams.

But this is only half the story. While some of us are brutally guilt- ridden, others have dispensed with guilt all together. For those who are "Rid of guilt," the problem is now turned on its head. Not at all oppressed by guilt, they shun it, ridicule it, and seek to expunge it from their lives. They deny there is ever a reason to feel guilty or ashamed. For them, guilt

is nothing but an anachronism, an annoyance, a bore. Since guilt is utterly distractive, they say, let's excuse it utterly from our lives.

Those who are "Rid of guilt" also bend over backwards to make sure they are not "Guilted" anyone else. This is especially true the way they raise their children. Studiously, they avoid any kind of instruction, advice, or guidance. So afraid are they of "laying a guilt trip" on their children, they do nothing, say nothing, which even vaguely smacks of "Should" or "Should not." Thus, they lose their capacity to speak about standards of right and wrong. In this- the single most important area of child raising- they become tragically mute, their children selfish and unprincipled.

Today, let us say it loud and clear. Guilt can be a terrible, debilitating force in our lives. Those who are "Guilt- ridden" need to rid themselves of guilt, which is irrational, exaggerated, unjustified. On the other hand, those who have rid themselves

of guilt need to ask what they have lost by exercising it, the cost they have had to pay for removing it from their lives.

You see, guilt is imperative for us. Guilt is what makes us human. It is what used to be called our “conscience,” the power within us that reminds us we are created in God’s image. Without it, we are nothing but beasts. That is why the only thing shameful about shame is never feeling it. As crazy as it may sound, we need guilt in our lives.

What can guilt do for us? First and foremost, it can cause us to rectify wrongs we have done. Without a sense of guilt, without shame for past mistakes we would never go back to apologize and undo the damage we have done. Just recently, I read an article about a man, very active in the police Athletic League, helping young men to grow up with different values and standards. Asked why, he said his involvement had come out of remorse for the crimes he had committed as a street kid growing up in North Omaha. Without this sense that he had done something wrong, something to atone for, he would have

never accomplished the good he does. Guilt was instrumental in turning his mistakes to good purpose. So can it be for us.

 Guilt can also help us raise different, responsible children. There are times here in this sanctuary, at our B'nai -Mitzvah ceremonies, some young people from our congregation on those Shabbat mornings, felt that loud talking, laughing, and texting, was appropriate behavior for the sanctuary. And I had to wonder: Where were their parents? Where were the responsible adults to say: "Shame on you? You should know better than to behave that way!" And I thought: We are all so anxious, to not let Judaism be a source of guilt for our kids, but we keep silence and allow them to behave almost any way they please, even here in God's house. When all is said and done, perhaps all we can hope for these children is that the voice of their conscious has been aroused- that finally they will know enough to feel appropriately guilty for their inappropriate behavior. Only then can they grow and mature. Only through guilt can they- and we- change for the better.

Finally, guilt can teach us the meaning of responsibility to those we love. Without guilt, we feel no sense of accountability to each other. We simply do what is easiest, least demanding, most convenient.

When we live without guilt we live without loyalty, without love. Guilt teaches us that we bear a responsibility to those we love-- and we cannot abandon it, even when it's uncomfortable, even when it's inconvenient, even when it hurts. Without guilt, there is no caring, no kindness, and no family! Without guilt we simply are not human.

My friends, there is a wonderful play called "J.B." by Archibald MacLeish. In this modern interpretation of the difficult story of The Book of Job, JB suffers one tragedy after another, and he wants to know why. Three so called "comforters" come to bring him relief and solace. The first one is the Christian who says: "It's not your fault; you are the victim of original sin." Then comes the Marxists who say: "It's not your fault: you're the victim of economic determinism." Finally, there

comes the psychiatrist who says: "It's not your fault. You're the victim of unconscious drives you cannot control." Then, in one of the most powerful passages in modern drama J.B. responds: "No, I want to be responsible. I want it to be my fault. Because that's what it means to be human. It means to say: "I have the power to choose the moral content of my life. And I will choose it."

This is what Yom Kippur is all about. This day comes to tell the "Guilt-- ridden" among us to stop torturing ourselves with exaggerated, needless guilt. But it also comes to tell those of us who have rid ourselves of guilt that we cannot, we must not live without it.

My friends Yom Kippur is not a "downer," not a day for "beating ourselves up." It is, above all else, a day of hope- for it tells us we can learn from the past and so become better people for the future. This morning, I pray may we free ourselves from bitter and baseless self-recrimination, but also spur ourselves on to holiness through reflection and

atonement. Only in this way can we rise up to be what God always meant us to be- “A little lower than the angels.”