

Jewish Guilt

What is it about Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur that gets hundreds of thousands of Jews who seem to care nothing about their religion all year long, suddenly to feel little twinges of obligation? Is it this the Jewish angst or guilt Philip Roth writes about?

There is a joke that a Christian expects that if he is found guilty before the Heavenly Tribunal on Judgment Day, he will be sentenced to eternal damnation and suffering. The Jew, on the other hand, expects to be let off with costs! Now let us ignore the anti-Semitic implication of "costs". The fact is that Judaism is an optimistic religion and one in which we do have a sort of special relationship with the Almighty. We do indeed expect special treatment, even if throughout history we seem to have blown it time and time again. It is very hard to explain Jewish survival against the heavy odds, and for so long, unless one assumes some sort of Heavenly intervention. Is guilt the price of this?

Consider the Mishna at the end of Taanit: "The happiest days of the year for Israel were Yom Kippur (and Tu B'Av) when the daughters of Jerusalem used to dress in white and dance in vineyards." These were the great "singles events" of Jewish life in ancient Israel. Judaism seems to have been a much more relaxed, fun religion! It all seems a world away from the serious, heavy atmosphere we have come to associate with the High Holy Days!

Why now are the Holy Days such heavy experiences, such penance to be suffered? Can it be said that Jewish guilt has won? But what is Jewish guilt? The Biblical attitude is pretty simple. Done something wrong? Admit it. Not to a priest, but to God. Then determine not to do it again; and finally, bring a sacrifice. That is it. Start all over again; the past is forgotten. All the Biblical words for "sin" imply no more than an error of judgment, to miss the mark, to step off the path, to fall short. There is no "state of sin", just mistakes that need to be avoided next time. Just get back on the path. The Biblical word for "guilt", "asham", is only once used of individuals. It is simply a category of sacrifice.

Some lay the blame at the door of Christianity and its preoccupation with original sin, the Greek dichotomy between body and mind, so that body is bad, sex a concession, celibacy the ideal. This explains their traditions of self-flagellation and monastic asceticism. Perhaps it was a Medieval Jewish response to Christian Crusader piety? But that is too easy. You can find similar ideas in Jewish sources of two thousand years ago.

All religions throughout the world have a very strong element of guilt and the need to purge it in various ways. And in every religion you will find those who treat its obligations as a celebration of life and others as a discipline. Perhaps in our case it is a post-destruction response to exile and suffering, and the feeling that the more we suffer the sooner we will be forgiven and escape the constant and unrelenting anti-Semitism.

The Holocaust exacerbated things of course. Guilt is even stronger amongst the children of Holocaust survivors than survivors themselves. In Israel so many have lost a relative, a friend or suffered in some way. Perhaps it is the guilt of survival that weighs heavily. Or perhaps it's the realization that the wonderful dreams and ideals of Zionism, of an ethical, just society, have been lost, and we are all to blame for our current greed and corruption.

We have lots of good reasons for guilt. But the response needs to be to change, to do something, not to wallow in it. Guilt is not necessarily a religious one. The trouble with guilt is that it can become a masochistic end in itself. Suffering makes us feel better. It gives us an excuse to go on doing all the wrong things.

Sadly, that is usually what happens. We go through the process of atonement, only to carry on afterwards in just the same way as before, as if nothing happened. And if that's all these Holy Days are, salves to our consciences but of no tangible benefit to us or our society, then frankly a dance in the park or will be of much more benefit!