

## WHAT'S WITH THE GUILT?

**BASED ON RABBI YAACOV HABER AND THE OU PARDES PROJECT  
& THE MORASHA SYLLABUS**

*A central goal of the High Holidays is a spiritual transformation that Judaism calls Teshuvah, loosely translated as “repentance,” (literally, “return”). Teshuva is a process of introspection and personal growth. A key part of this process is regretting our past transgressions. In fact, on Yom Kippur we articulate as many of our misdeeds as possible and try to genuinely feel remorseful about having done them. But don't regrets just lead to feelings of guilt, and isn't guilt an objectively negative sensation?*

One emotion that is popularly, although negatively, associated with Judaism is guilt. It is the focus of countless “Jewish mother” jokes. It has been said that the function of religion is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. But contrary to the implied cynicism of that statement, there is a value in discomfort. Discomfort forces us to face the inadequacy of our character and to aspire to further growth.

Western society has chosen to treat guilt like a disease. Since the birth of psychoanalysis, we have waged war on guilt as we have on polio and smallpox. The blame for wrongdoing has been shifted away from the individual and attributed to every other possible factor – including upbringing, peer pressure, and genetic predisposition – so that we should not feel guilty, or for that matter be guilty, for the crimes we commit. Many times, the words “Don't lay a guilt trip on me” have stopped a sincere rebuke in its tracks. Have we created a guilt-free society? Have we stripped ourselves of responsibility and accountability? If so, where do we go from here?

On the other hand, guilt can be the most debilitating of emotions. A person overwhelmed with guilt can barely live, unable to carry the unbearable burden. Instead of channeling guilt productively so as not to fall into wrongdoing again, some people seem to repeat the very offense for which they feel guilty: the proverbial thief who returns to the scene of the crime. Alternatively, they may project their guilt onto those around them. Given this range of responses to guilt, the question we deal with in this session is a profound one: Is guilt a good feeling or a bad one? Does it cripple us emotionally, or does it spur us on to change and improve?

### How Would You Respond?

#### Scenario One

*You have been dating a man for some time when you discover that your cousin had almost been engaged to him. Your cousin, who has struggled with anorexia, is still devastated by the breakup. When she finds out that you are dating him, she feels betrayed and suffers a relapse. You struggle with your guilt. Do you end the relationship?*

## Scenario Two

*In your youth you were a bit of a party animal. Not only did you abuse your own body with too much drinking and reckless behavior, but you all too often “used” other people in the process. You were an unreliable friend, you destroyed property that didn't belong to you, and wasted massive amounts of time that could have been used productively. Whenever you think back to those years, you feel dreadfully guilty. With no way of really making amends, what can you do about it now?*

### Sources for discussion:

Judaism recognizes both the positive and negative sides of guilt.

### What kind of guilt is counter-productive to personal growth?

Guilt can be spiritually debilitating, involving us over and over again in our transgressions rather than getting beyond them.

#### 1. Rabbi Yaakov Haber, Pardes

The story is told of the famous rabbi, Rabbi Yisroel Salanter, who on the eve of Yom Kippur, spotted a man walking down the street apparently immersed in repentance. The man looked horrified by the fact that he had sinned in the past year and was dwelling intensely on his wrongdoings.

Reb Yisroel asked the man for directions, but the man wouldn't respond. He signaled as if to say that he was too involved in preparation for the upcoming holy day. Reb Yisroel walked away feeling rejected. “Because that man sinned, why do others have to suffer?” he later asked his students. Reb Yisroel also pointed out that as a result of the man's obsession with his sins, he had, in fact, committed one of the gravest sins – that of hurting another human being. The man was so self-involved he could not see the person standing before him.

#### 2. From a speech given by the first Rebbe of Ger, the Chidushei HaRim before Kol Nidrei, Likutey Yehuda, Inyan Yom Kippur

A person is where his thoughts are. One's whole soul is immersed in the thing he is contemplating. Therefore, if one dwells on the wrong he has done in the past, by dwelling he has once again involved himself with the evil. While one's thoughts are involved in evil and his sin is alive, it is impossible to repent. This can only lead to depression. To dwell on one's past, to say, “Yes, I sinned. No, I didn't sin” is useless. What does God gain from this? In the time one spends thinking about sins, one could be stringing pearls, and really do something for God. What does it mean to turn from evil, it means to get away from one's evil,

don't even think about it, and when it comes to reciting the confession service on Yom Kippur, say it quickly! Don't dwell on sin, rather on the coronation of God.

### **3. Rabbi Eliyahu E. Dessler, Michtav M'Eliyahu, Vol. 4, p. 184**

It happens that a person sins and, as a result, feels guilty. This certainly comes from his good conscience. If his fear of G-d is strong, he can save himself with these thoughts. However, if his fear of G-d is weak, the experience of guilt will present a challenge to his will. In order to remove this obstacle, he will break all boundaries of his sins and so attempt to silence the voice of his conscience completely.

## **What kind of guilt is actually constructive and conducive to personal growth?**

Guilt is a necessary and natural part of the process of personal growth. Coupled with faith in God, it need not be depressing.

### **4. King David, Psalms 38:4**

There is no peace in my bones because of my transgressions.

### **5. Based on Rabbi Nachman of Breslav; Lekutey Moharan I, 4:5 from The Wings of the Sun, by Abraham Greenbaum**

The idea of Vidui (verbal confession) is not to wallow in guilt and self-recrimination. It is to give frank and honest expression to one's often conflicting thoughts and feelings, and to own up to and take responsibility for one's personal shortcomings and for any mistakes one has made. This is what lays the foundation for more positive attitudes and behavior in the future. Until one gives verbal expression to one's negative thoughts and feelings, they remain "inscribed on one's bones" and may continue to give rise to actual physical symptoms.

### **6. Rabbi Eliyahu E. Dessler, Michtav M'Eliyahu, Vol. II, p. 79**

It is natural for a person to try and forget unpleasant incidents of the past, and thus seek to diminish the influence of his sins. We say to ourselves, "What has passed is passed. From this point on, we will start a new chapter." But the truth is, without a deep sense of guilt, the influence of the past is not weakened at all, even after many years. In this physical world, we live under the constrictions of time. The past and the future are hidden from our eyes. However, the spiritual world transcends time, and from the perspective of the soul a person at this very moment is involved in the sin...and so, the guiltier he feels the more he recognizes the greatness of his

obligation and the lowness of his sin, which leads him to regret even more. Great men spend their entire lives in repentance, for they are always deepening their understanding.

### 7. Rabbi J.B. Soloveitchik, On Repentance, p. 259

The feeling of acknowledging sin is one of self-degradation and abnegation, of “Who am I and what makes me worthy of coming before G-d and seeking His nearness?” Acknowledgment of sin gives expression to everything that is tragic in man’s predicament as he realizes that his life has reached a dead end, and that his very existence is meaningless and empty. On all sides, he is engulfed by Ecclesiastes’ plaintive cry, “Vanity of vanities, all is vanity,” and in the midst of this nothingness man feels that he is loathsome, an outcast, an abomination. The horror of his condition brings utter despair, an overbearing sense of guilt, and a feeling of worthlessness.

This is one of the basic components of the repentance process – but there is another one which is antithetical to the first, yet is an integral part of the very same process, and whoever fails to achieve it cannot become a full penitent. This element is faith in the Creator of the Universe and in man’s spiritual potential. This belief says that despite the fact that man may become an abomination and a loathsome being, he still has the capacity to uplift himself and escape from the cage of his despair. Maimonides emphasizes this point time and again – the option is open to man; it is up to him to choose; what great powers have been granted man!

### What is the relationship of guilt to repentance? How can one be used in the service of the other?

### 8. Rambam (Maimonides), Hilchot Teshuvah (Laws of Repentance), 2:2, 9

How does one do teshuvah?

- The transgressor stops doing the transgression and removes it from his thoughts.
- He resolves that he will not do it again in the future...
- He regrets [that which he did] in the past...
- He verbally expresses his wrongdoings to God and makes a verbal resolution for the future.

Regarding wrongdoings against one’s fellow man: one must reimburse whatever he owes him, and ask the other person’s forgiveness.

**9. Rabbi A.Y. Kook, Orot HaTeshuva, p. 16**

Repentance does not come to embitter life, but rather to sweeten it.

**10. Rabbi Eliyahu E. Dessler, Michtav M'Eliyahu, Vol. II, 79-80**

The purpose of regret is to strengthen one's commitment for the future. This is because a commitment to improve is built on recognizing the negativity of transgression and feeling the sting of past mistakes...

When a person feels true regret, he comes to realize that the transgression just wasn't worth it...It is the transgression itself that caused him this awareness, and therefore he returns to God out of love [rather than fear of the consequences]. This is the meaning of the statement, "Great is teshuvah for it converts transgressions into merits" [Yoma 86b]. The transgressor was raised to a level of great love for God due to the transgressions, and therefore God judges them as mitzvot!