



the relationships between ourselves and others, offended, hurt, abused their trust, and in so doing also ruptured the connection with God. Penitence and forgiveness demand we rebuild, reconnect (*re-ligate*, the root of 'religion'), strengthen the ties that bind us to others, bolster our communities which suffer from the selfishness and lack of integrity expressed in what we call "sin." So on Yom Kippur, it's no accident that we create an urban environment that makes us all fellow citizens, that allows us to rediscover and reinforce the relationships in the most local of the concentric circles of our lives. We celebrate commonality and trust, not competition and selfish consumption.

This commonality is expressed in the more traditional themes of the day as well. Despite the emphasis on personal soul-searching and *teshuva*, repentance, the main features of the Yom Kippur liturgy, such as the oft-repeated *vidu'i*, confession, and the *Avoda* service, are all phrased in the plural, for several reasons. One is to reinforce our empathy for other people. Sharing our imperfect humanity with one another through collectively confessing our individual sins comforts us, and encourages us to pardon others seeking our forgiveness for wrongs they have committed against us. Moreover, though, while individual *teshuva* may be sufficient for personal wrongdoing, there are collective transgressions which require a shared process of atonement and remediation. Threats to health, justice and well-being are the results of structural societal patterns that need to be changed economically and politically. And when we degrade the earth, we harm others more vulnerable, and those that will come after us, who will inherit the problems we're piling up for them.

Specifically, "environmental sins" like over-consumption and pollution abuse things which are everyone's, and thus are a form of theft. But it is especially difficult to ask forgiveness from other communities or nations (not to mention the unborn), and make restitution to them for these: "Robbing the public is a graver offense than robbing an individual, for one who robs an individual can appease that person and return what he stole, but one who robs the public cannot appease the public and return to all of them what was stolen from them" (Tosefta Bava Kamma 10:8).

Indeed, environmental wrongs shed new light on an old theological conundrum. The Torah (in the Decalogue Ex. 20:5, and also Ex. 34:7) states categorically that there is inter-generational reward and punishment: the sins of the parents will be visited upon the children, even the third and fourth generations. That's a long time to pay. Later prophets (Jeremiah 31:29-30, and Ezekiel chapter 18) repudiated this seemingly unjust doctrine in no uncertain terms, saying descendents shall not suffer for the wrongdoings of their forebears. But with toxins such as persistent organic pollutants (POPs), which last for generations in the environment, and other long-term threats, the question of children bearing the consequences of parents' sins isn't theological or metaphysical, it's ecological and very physical. And with the threats of unstable climate, drought, human health issues and more from continued global warming, the very climate has become a moral instrument of our lifestyles and norms. Similarly, the *u'netane tokef* prayer, with its heartrending passages on who will live and who will die, who by fire and who by water, who by hunger and thirst, and who by poverty, needs to move us to action to change

those "fates" created by societal injustice. Prayer may not change the world, but it can change people, who change the world. Just as we collectively make our local environments more healthy and friendly for this one day a year, we can make the world more sustainable through our political and economic choices. As Heschel pointedly remarked: "In a free society, only some may be guilty but all are responsible." And that means responsible for one another, individually and collectively: "If you can stop your household from committing a sin, but do not, you are held responsible for the sins of your household. If you can stop the people of your city from sinning, but do not, you are held responsible for the sins of the city. If you can stop the whole world from sinning, and do not, you are held responsible for the sins of the whole world" (Shabbat 54b).

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