



High Holy Days 2019  
Rabbi Jan Uhrbach

Kol Nidre  
(Part B, Before Confession)  
We and Our Ancestors Have Sinned

Ten times on Yom Kippur (five times silently, five aloud) we'll recite an introduction to the Ashamnu, the short confession, as we're about to do here on bottom of page 234:

Our God and God of our ancestors, hear our prayer; do not ignore our plea. Our God and God of our ancestors, we are neither so insolent nor so obstinate as to claim in Your presence that we are righteous, without sin; for we, like our ancestors who came before us, have sinned.

The ending comes from the Talmud, which says that the requirement to confess on Yom Kippur is *aval anaḥnu ḥatanu* ("but we have sinned"). If we say this, no more is necessary.

*Aval*: the great "nevertheless" or "but" that responds to all of our excuses, self-justifications and denials. Maybe so, maybe we are justified, it's not our fault, we didn't intend, *aval* -- but, with all that -- we have sinned. That's no small thing: just that, without further elaboration, to acknowledge that we're at fault. We all want to see ourselves as good people -- there's nothing wrong with that -- we basically are. *Aval* -- we, good people that we are, have sinned.

And one of the most common excuses we make, especially with respect to societal issues, including some of the most pressing and challenging problems -- let's use the word, sins -- of our day is: "I didn't create this problem - why am I responsible?"

So I want to point out something you may not have noticed. The Talmud tells us to say *aval anaḥnu ḥatanu*. What we actually say is: *Aval anaḥnu va'avoteinu ḥatanu*. "**We and our ancestors** have sinned."

"Our ancestors" was included very early on in Sefardi and Italian prayerbooks. Maimonides (11th century) has it in his, and with very solid Biblical grounding:

- Lev. 26:40 - וְהִתְנַדְּדוּ אֶת-עֲוֹנֵם וְאֶת-עֲוֹן אֲבוֹתֵם "Then they will confess their sin and the sin of their ancestors";
- Psalm 106:6: וְנִשְׁאַנּוּ עִם-אֲבוֹתֵינוּ הַעֲוִינוּ הַרְשָׁעֵנוּ "We, like our ancestors, have sinned";
- Nehemiah 9:2: וַיִּעַמְדוּ וַיִּתְנַדְּדוּ עַל-חַטֹּאתֵיהֶם וְעַל-חַטֹּאת אֲבוֹתֵיהֶם: "They stood, and confessed their sins and the sins of their ancestors." (In this case, very significantly, at the time of their rededication to Torah and the return to and rededication of the Temple.)

But in Ashkenazi liturgy, it was included and then removed. This is the first prayerbook in the Conservative movement to put it back.

The back and forth reflects ambivalence. How can we speak ill of the dead? And why is it relevant anyway? The past is the past -- are we liable for sins people did before we were even born? On the other hand, it's kind of comforting to know we aren't the first generation to screw things up -- it's part of human condition. And perhaps we see it as a limitation on liability. Yes we sinned, but others did before us; we're not responsible for everything. Thus our translation, which softens the meaning, "*we like our ancestors before us.*"

But I think it means exactly what it says: not only our sins, but the sins of those who came before us, are part and parcel of our teshuvah. Both in terms of what we need to forgive, and what we need to atone for. Both individually and collectively. We are indeed obligated to atone for previous generations' sins. We're not guilty of them -- that's different. But we're responsible to atone for them.

It's based on the core Jewish value of *areyvut* (suretyship). We are all *erevim*, guarantors, for one another, a concept which in turn emerges directly from the fact that Judaism is a covenantal religion. Rambam said that notion of suretyship is precisely why we confess in the plural, and do so inter-generationally,.

It's also an expression of the theology of unity I talked about on Rosh Hashanah, and the name of God (YHVH, that we pronounce Adonai) representing the integration of past/present/future. When we talk about living in the present, that doesn't mean ignoring the past and future. It means being fully attentive of way past and future are alive and resonating in the present moment.

And it's inherent in our concept of teshuvah, that teshuvah actually repairs the past. In addition to obligations to ourselves and to future generations, when it is within our power to repair the past, we have the obligation to do so. In the context of individual teshuvah, that manifests as confronting the same situation and doing differently. In communal/generational teshuvah, it means that although history cycles through similar patterns, it's a spiral not a circle, and our generation has an opportunity and therefore the responsibility to do differently. And if it feels unfair to be held responsible for what previous generations did, trust me that we're going to need some atonement from the generations yet to come!

And finally, it emerges from the very practical reality about way things work. Everything that happens is part of a larger context, and a wise person takes the long view. If we're going to actually move forward on healthier footing, we can't deal with problems -- wrongdoing, sin, hate -- as isolated incidents. We need systemic thinking across not only space, but time.

We'll circle back to this periodically throughout the day. But I wanted to introduce it now, and invite us to sit with our gut response: perhaps defensiveness, resistance, discomfort, or perhaps relief, openness, yes, we need to talk about this. For now, in order to be able to truly confess -- to say that avel with meaning, we're going to get all our excuses out of the way by chanting the Anti-Ashamnu<sup>1</sup>:

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1. My gratitude to Rabbi Rob Scheinberg for his inspiration in creating an "Anti-Ashamnu."

I **Z**oned out  
You're too sensitive  
I have an e**X**cuse  
It's just the **W**ay I am

**V**icious lies  
**U**nderstand my side  
Think of what I've been **T**hrough  
**S**he **S**tarted in on me

Not my **R**esponsibility  
It wasn't **Q**uite that bad  
I'm **P**rovoked and under **P**ressure  
**O**thers get away with worse

**N**o one was really hurt  
It wasn't really **M**e  
Look what you made me do  
I was **K**idding  
You're **J**udgmental  
My **I**ntentions were good

I **H**ad to  
Just **G**et over it  
It's not my **F**ault  
Everybody does the same

He **D**eserved it  
I **C**ouldn't help it  
How can you **B**lame me  
**A**fter **A**ll I've done for you