

# “Later He Realizes His Guilt”

*Rabbi Jonathan P. Slater, DMin*

“Though he has known it, the fact has escaped him,  
but later he realizes his guilt.”

—Leviticus 5:3

I was a young, innocent, and earnest new rabbi, leading a group of congregants to Israel. I knew next to no one there, so I was dependent on the travel agent to arrange much of the trip. But I did have a cousin, someone I hadn't seen in well over a decade, who lived in Jerusalem. Trying to be creative and hoping to provide some experience that would connect my people to actual Israelis, I arranged an invitation to attend services and then visit in my cousin's home for Shabbat lunch. That way we would visit an Israeli synagogue—a “native” community, as it were—and have the opportunity to hear what Israelis were thinking, how they were living.

Now, I knew that my cousin was *frum* (“observant”), but beyond that, I knew nothing of her life. We arrived at her synagogue, and I was somewhat startled. The women's section was completely outside of the men's prayer room. I was worried about how the women in my group would manage without English translators—both for the prayers and for the conversation there. Then, I noticed that the men around me were

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Rabbi Jonathan P. Slater, DMin, was ordained at The Jewish Theological Seminary of America and has a doctor of ministry degree from the Pacific School of Religion. He is the author of *Mindful Jewish Living: Compassionate Practice* and codirector of programs at the Institute for Jewish Spirituality, as well as an instructor in meditation at the JCC in Manhattan and other venues. He contributed to *Who by Fire, Who by Water—Un'taneh Tokef* and *All These Vows—Kol Nidre* (both Jewish Lights).

dressed in what we back home would call “black hat.” Orthodox I was expecting, but leaning toward *charedi* (ultra-Orthodox)? That was a possibility I had not considered.

Still, we got through services and then moved upstairs to lunch with my cousin. She was pleasant enough, welcoming and friendly. But soon, the conversation turned to politics: relations with the Palestinians, the possibility of sharing the land in two states, what it means to be a Jew in the Land of Israel. What I heard from my cousin was the type of fundamentalist reading of Scripture I would have expected from Christian televangelists Pat Robertson or Jerry Falwell. Arguing literally from one proof text after another, she advocated exclusive possession of the land, negation of the idea of a “Palestinian” people—even to the extent of identifying them with the biblical Amalek (and a descendant of Haman, therefore), worthy of annihilation. I was outraged.

Despite worries about what my congregants would think about me, the trip unfolded well after that, and we returned home, with no outward negative repercussions from the Shabbat lunch. But inside myself, I remained confused, hurt, shamed, and worried. I wrote my cousin, expressing my embarrassment and abhorrence of her views on the Palestinians. I rejected her expression of Jewish life and (dare I say) prayed that others would prevail in the formation of Jewish life and culture in Israel. That, I thought, was that.

Over a decade later, after significant personal upheaval (divorce) and a time of reflection on my life, my values, and my future, this event returned to consciousness. I replayed the luncheon on that fateful Shabbat day and realized, with shock and dismay, that my cousin had offered me—us—hospitality without expectation of reciprocation. She was friendly and welcoming, fully herself without putting on airs. She was the gracious host, and I was the ingrate—to the point of failing even to have said “Thank you.”

I reviewed my letter to her. Who was I, an outsider, a guest, to reprimand or chastise her and her family? What made me think that my response was so obviously correct or even meaningful, given my cousin’s life choices? It was certainly inconsiderate. At some distance from the event, geographically, temporally, and psychologically, and feeling more settled, reflective, and open, I looked back more clearly on the fear, anger, and embarrassment that had led me to act so shamefully. I wrote another letter to confess my sin, to ask forgiveness, to acknowledge my wrong.

This is the nature of the consciousness that attends wrongdoing. In the moment of transgression, behavior that should rightfully embarrass us seems perfectly proper—masked, as it is, by the powerful emotions that prompt it: anger, fear, greed, resentment, confusion, and self-righteousness. Only later, when the feeling of threat passes and we settle into a moment of calm and clarity, does our action come once again to mind, so that we may face it, acknowledge it for the mistake it is, and make amends.

This aspect of human nature—our hesitation to admit what would be shameful or a blow to our fragile ego—is at the heart of confession. The first word is *ashamnu*, “we have sinned.” The root of this verb appears in the early chapters of Leviticus, regarding the sacrifices brought to atone for an inadvertent, unintentional, or unknown trespass against the domain of the holy.

According to Mishnah Sh’vuot 1:2 and 2:1–2, the sacrifices referred to in Leviticus 5:1–13 apply only when there exists “initial knowledge,” “ultimate knowledge,” and “lack of notice in the interim.” In other words, something originally known was ignored or forgotten and then later recalled. It was at that point that the offender undertook to expiate for his offense.<sup>1</sup>

The event itself—whether entering in impurity into the holy precincts, eating holy food in impurity, failing to fulfill an oath, or misuse of sacred implements—takes place, but the significance is either unknown at the time or is forgotten. When the trespass—once forgotten—comes again to mind, one brings the sacrifice.

Is this not the case with much of our lives? Do we not regularly make mistakes that we choose to ignore, of which we are oblivious, or that we know but are so pained over that we forget? What is it that restores awareness of our mistakes to consciousness? What allows us to face ourselves fully, to acknowledge that we have been wrong, and then to do something about it?

It is my experience that when I allow my mind to settle and my heart to be at ease, I become more open to such awareness. In the event described above, it was in the quiet of the house, in my aloneness, that I began to touch the truth of my life. Divorce was challenging: What was the truth of the relationship now gone sour? Who was really “at fault”? I could stick with my story of innocence, of being wronged, or I could look more deeply to seek the truth. It was in the absence of my partner, before whom I had had to defend my ego, with whom I was unable to be fully

present, that I became aware of how guarded, how closed off I had been. I realized how hard it had been to speak the truth of my mistakes. Once I became aware of that truth in my married relationship, I began to see it as well in the rest of my life. However aware I may have been before of my guilt, of my dissembling, of my half-truths, only now was I prepared to fully acknowledge it, confess it, and come clean.

This is the work of Elul and the Days of Awe. While there are specific acts that we may undertake to rectify wrongs during this time, my sense is that we would do well to employ these days to sit quietly, to allow the mind and heart to rest, to allow the habitual narratives that shape our lives to slow down. Perhaps in the quiet, as the stories subside, we will begin to feel our own pain—both at what was done to us and at what we have done to others. Compassion for our own suffering, while seemingly solipsistic, makes it possible to have empathy for others and to face the hard truths about how we have treated them. Meeting our selves, our true selves, our flawed selves, in moments of compassionate calm, informs us as to how deeply others too feel shame, fear, anger, and loss. Knowing our own hearts to have some small measure of ease, we wish only for others to find that as well. So, we are emboldened and heartened to acknowledge our wrongs to others, to confess, and to make amends.

By the time Yom Kippur arrives, we grasp the truth of its signal announcement, *Ashamnu*, “We have sinned.” We have, indeed, made mistakes, and are prepared to acknowledge them. But, although awareness has come to us in our inner private practice, we are now challenged to confess in public. Not an easy task! We would rather turn aside, hide, forget again. But, the second word comes along: *Bagadnu*, “We have betrayed”—our true selves, others, God. Who we are at this moment we realize is not who we truly wish to be. Dissembling now, running away now, would truly be a betrayal of all we have learned by paying close attention to our hearts.

Each of the next twenty-two words is helpful, instructive, in turning us more and more to the truth. But, my sense is that the rhythmic chant of the confession, the seemingly unending succession of terms, is meant mostly to keep us connected to the moment, to awareness, to the truth. The confession does not arise from outside—at least not if we have been paying attention, if we have used the preceding period to settle the mind and heart. We are aware of the truth: we have made a mistake. It is time now to make it right.

Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish taught (Talmud, Yoma 86b) that repentance (*t’shuvah*) is so powerful that it can transform intentional sins into mere unintentional mistakes. Yet, he also taught that it can transform intentional sins into merits, as if in performing the deed one had done the right thing. The first applies, says the Talmud, when we turn ourselves around out of fear of punishment, loss of honor, or begrudgingly; the latter is the case when we do *t’shuvah* out of love—of God, ourselves, others. It is in the turning, in our own inner awakening to the truth, that the earlier misdeed impels us to make amends—repairs, actually. In the act of repair, our sin is transformed into merit, the meritorious acts of goodness and of truth.

Several weeks after I sent off my apology to my cousin I received a reply. She wrote that she had no recollection of having received the first letter, and no apology was necessary. She appreciated my taking the time to write to her but hoped I did not feel regret or pain over an incident that had never taken place. She simply looked forward to the next time I would visit. As did I.

