



Guilt is a pervasive feature of human existence. It is a corrosive emotion that consumes life's meaning. The universality of guilt is not always consciously recognized, since guilt may appear masked in the guise of vague moods of generalized anxiety and melancholy, or in self-destructive behavior. Even when recognized as such, guilt often appears to arise without cause or reason, as spontaneous "black holes" of human existence. These oftentimes obscure or rootless occurrences of guilt tend to make the emotion mysterious, and open to varied interpretations of its ultimate nature and origin.

Through the ages, humans have sought to understand guilt's ultimate nature and causes in the hope that such knowledge would provide a way to rid themselves of the pain that guilt inflicts. Historically, religion has provided the primary answer to this search. Through the beliefs of religion, the ultimate nature of guilt has been explained, and through religion's ceremonies and ritual, guilt has been expiated. Over time, individual religions have provided varied interpretations and remedies for guilt, but all have provided some interpretation and remedy. Accordingly, dealing with guilt has become an integral function of religion, and it is doubtful that a religion could be taken seriously that does not provide its adherents with a significant approach to the problem of guilt. It is for this reason that the holiday of Yom Kippur presents so serious a challenge to the liberal Jew.

Since biblical times, the Yom Kippur has been the primary vehicle among Jews for dealing with human guilt. The language of the Yom Kippur services explains the ultimate nature and causes of guilt, and its ritual provides the means to rid oneself from the misery of its pain. Although changes have occurred over the millennia in the rituals employed to celebrate the Yom Kippur, its essential meaning is viewed in much the same way in present day Orthodox and Reform Judaism as it was in the various biblical Judaisms. The difficulty this presents to the modern Jew is that this historical understanding of the Yom Kippur, which may be termed the "traditional Yom Kippur" is logically incompatible with a liberal or polydox Judaism. Why this is so can be seen from an examination of the situation in Reform Judaism, which, on the one hand is essentially a liberal Judaism, and, on the other presents in its institutional prayerbook and services the traditional Yom Kippur.

The basic concepts of the traditional Yom Kippur, which are derived from a covenant theology, may be summarized in the following five propositions.

1) The Jews at Mt. Sinai entered into a covenant (contractual relation) with the creator god of the universe, the deity Yahveh. Yahveh promised to exercise special care (as compared to that given all other humans) over the Jews, providing them with favorable economic and political conditions, in return for their obedience, and the obedience of their descendants in perpetuity, to Yahveh's commandments or "mitsvot."

2) The commandments of Yahveh that the Jews and their descendants were obligated to obey appear in the Bible, primarily the Pentateuch or first five books. They dictate what the Jews are to do and not do in all significant areas of their lives, from beliefs regarding reality and morals, to rituals and holidays, even clothing and food.

3) Violation of Yahveh's commandments constitutes sin. Indeed, without Yahveh's commandments there can be no sin, for sin means an offense against deity, which occurs only by disobedience to deity's commandments. Sin, violation of Yahveh's commandments, is then, the ultimate source of human guilt. Guilt, consequently, has a fundamentally supernatural origin, and can be removed, therefore, only by a supernatural remedy.

4) This supernatural remedy comes from Yahveh, who is a forgiving god. Humans rid themselves of sin and guilt by begging and receiving forgiveness from Yahveh for having violated his commandments. Thus only through a supernatural act of grace can a person be freed of guilt.

5) Therefore, to enable the Jews to rid themselves of guilt, Yahveh has graciously commanded them to observe the Yom Kippur. If the Jews observe the Yom Kippur, and genuinely atone for their sins, Yahveh will forgive them. At the moment of forgiveness, sin and guilt are instantaneously wiped away. (This instantaneous removal of guilt traditionally is understood to occur at the end of Yom Kippur day as evening approaches.)

The entire conceptual scheme of the traditional Yom Kippur epitomized above: that a covenant was made at Sinai between the creator god of the universe, Yahveh, and the Jews; that Yahveh issued commandments to the Jews; that the ultimate source of human guilt is violating the commandments of Yahveh; and that the only remedy for this guilt is the forgiveness of Yahveh, is known to us only from the Bible. No other source for the truth of the traditional Yom Kippur exists. Accordingly, if the Bible, our only source for believing the traditional Yom Kippur cannot be relied upon as trustworthy evidence, then there is no credible evidence for the validity of the traditional Yom Kippur, and no reason to believe its concepts of sin and guilt are true.

It is precisely here that the incompatibility of the traditional Yom Kippur with Reform, or any other form of liberal Judaism, occurs. The universal view of Reform and other liberal Jewish biblical scholars, in accord with all critical scholars, is that the Bible is a fallible document that was written by humans; that there is no objective evidence to verify that these human authors receive communications from the deity; and that there is no objective evidence to determine which parts of the Bible were communicated by deity assuming that such communication had ever occurred. Accordingly, there is no way for a liberal Jewish community such as Reform to claim that it is in possession of or has any knowledge of commandments issued by the universal creator god, which

its members, therefore must obey. The consequences of this conclusion are momentous. Without commandments from deity, there can be no sin, for sin, as pointed out earlier, arises only from a violation of deity's commandments. Without a concept of sin, the entire notion of human guilt as ultimately the result of sin must be abandoned, along with the belief that a human through supernatural forgiveness can in an instant be freed of guilt. In short, the traditional Yom Kippur is incompatible with liberal Judaism.

Unfortunately, institutional Reform Judaism has not come to recognize that the traditional Yom Kippur is inconsistent with its view of the Bible, even though rejection of the Pentateuchal commandments is implicit in the every day actions of the Reform Jewish Community. The Pentateuch commands, "And all that have not fins and scales in the seas. . . they shall be a detestable thing unto you; ye shall not eat of their flesh" (Lev. 11:10f.); yet who among Reform Jews thinks he sins when he eats shellfish? The Pentateuch commands, "The seventh day is a sabbath of solemn rest . . . ; whosoever doeth any work in the sabbath day, he shall surely be put to death" (Exod. 31:15); yet who in Reform feels he is guilty of a capital sin when he works on the seventh day? The Pentateuch commands, "And if a man lie with a man, as with a woman, . . . they shall surely be put to death" (Lev. 20:13); yet which liberal Jew thinks of homosexuals as capital sinners rather than as persons whose different sexual orientation so often brings them profound unhappiness? Still, despite all this, and the fact that no Reform theologian has ever been able to demonstrate that a single commandment in the Bible ever has come from deity, we read in the Yom Kippur service of the Union Prayerbook, "We have turned aside from Thy commandments and from Thy beneficent ordinances . . . For all those sins, O God of forgiveness, . . . pardon us, forgive us!" (pp.224,226).

The recognition that the traditional Yom Kippur is incompatible with liberal Judaism is a necessary first step to developing a concept of the Yom Kippur that is appropriate. Full discussion of such a view of Yom Kippur must await another time. The following points, however, may be briefly sketched which, I believe, must be given serious consideration in constructing any Yom Kippur ritual that will be meaningful for the modern liberal Jew.

1) Human guilt arises from within the human situation. No objective case for sin can be made in liberal religion. Humans produce guilt, and humans themselves must provide the remedy for it.

2) The most significant advance regarding human guilt in our time is the recognition that it is of two different kinds from two different sources: unrealistic guilt from the imaginary world of the unconscious within us; and realistic guilt from our actions in the world outside us. Ironically, the more painful guilt of the two that afflicts humans emanates from the first kind of guilt, from thoughts and desires deep within us regarding actions in reality that have never occurred.

J

3) There is no instantaneous way to remove guilt. Whether changing the world within or the world without that produces our guilt, human effort, as in all things, succeeds only gradually and slowly.

4) The hope that we can entirely rid ourselves of guilt is a vain one. We must learn to live with guilt. As finites, we are simply powerless to remedy every guilt producing situation.

Thus there is no supernatural remedy known to the liberal religionist that will instantaneously and supernaturally remove the guilt that afflicts humans. The traditional Yom Kippur is a myth and a dream. Nevertheless, contemplation, communion, catharsis, and compassion can enable humans to lead meaningful lives. For liberal Judaism, this may well sum up the celebration of the Yom Kippur that is open to us: a day of contemplation, communion, catharsis, and compassion.

Alvin J. Reines