

## #589: We Have Sinned Against You

My Yom Kippur Kol Nidre sermon

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**Note: This is a version of the sermon that I delivered on Yom Kippur night.**

Shabbat Shalom and G'mar Hatimah Tovah, may God bless all of us with a year of health, goodness, and peace.

So the story goes like this: A Catholic priest, a Muslim imam, a Baptist minister, and a rabbi are all at an interfaith retreat. They go into the forest, and the priest says, “Okay, my dear friends, we have to build trust between ourselves and our respective religions.

So while we’re here in the forest, each one of you is going to take this candle and confess a secret sin you’ve committed about which you’ve never told anyone. Since it’s my idea, I’ll start.”

So the priest takes the candle and says, “My name is Archbishop Sean Callahan O’Brien, and my sin is that I’ve had numerous affairs all over the world, and I’m sure that I have fathered at least four children. If any of this were to become public, the Pope would have me defrocked.”

The Muslim imam says, “My name is Imam Mohammed al Korani, and my sin is that I drink alcohol and I eat pork, and I’m an atheist, as well. If my followers found out, they would shun me forever.”

The Baptist minister takes the candle and says, “My name is Pastor Billy Bob Warner, and my sin is that I’ve embezzled and gambled away millions of dollars from charitable donations that were supposed to help the sick and hungry. If anyone found out, I’d be arrested and sent away for years.”

When the rabbi gets the candle, he clears his throat and nervously says, “My name is Rabbi Irwin Goldberg, and my sin is that I can’t keep a secret.”

As I said on Rosh Hashanah, I have based all four of my High Holy Day sermons on Psalm 27, the psalm of repentance that we recite twice a day during this season.

This evening, I’d like you to think about the seventh verse, which says, “Hear, O ETERNAL One, when I cry aloud; have mercy on me, answer me.” שְׁמַע־יְהוָה קוֹלִי אֶקְרָא וְחַנּוּנִי וְעֲנֵנִי: Just as the main event of Rosh Hashanah is hearing the shofar, the main event of Yom Kippur is the confession, the vidui. We ask the Holy One to hear our confession and grant us atonement.

There are two confessions, the shorter Ashamnu and the longer Al Het. Over the next 25 hours, we will say recite the Al Het prayer a number of times. In fact, we already recited it once before Kol Nidre during the Mincha.

The sins listed in the Al Het do not necessarily match our day-to-day experience. I don't know about you, but I don't act violently toward anybody and I don't loan money, so I don't charge any interest, let alone oppressive interest.

Part of the reason for this incongruity is that the Al Het is an alphabetic acrostic, and that whoever composed this prayer prioritized the poetry over the content.

The other reason is that we Jews are all responsible for each other's sins, כל ישראל ערבים זה בזה. So if a given sin, such as forbidden trysts, does not apply to you personally, it probably does apply to some Jew somewhere, and that is why we confess it. That's also why the prayer is written in the first person plural, the "we" voice. We atone for these sins because we are responsible for each other.

But even so, the Al-Het still leaves much to be desired. There are any number of sins that are far more relevant to our present and individual reality. Tonight, I'd like to tell you about some of these modern sins for which we ought to atone.

### **WE HAVE SINNED AGAINST YOU WITH COWARDICE.**

על חטא שחטאנו לפניך בפחדנות

Cowardice is a very widespread sin. We are afraid of making a fuss, afraid of getting canceled, afraid of what people will think. It's a sin that I struggle with myself, and it just sickens me when I detect it in my soul.

Just think what this country, this world would be like if we weren't so afraid. I learned what real courage is from Rachel Goldberg-Polin, the mother of Hersh Goldberg-Polin, one of the six hostages murdered by Hamas at the end of January. She put herself out there day after day as the spokesperson for the hostages and their families, tirelessly working on their behalf even as she worried about her own son of blessed memory.

In an interview on *The Promised Podcast*, this courageous woman told us about a Bedouin Muslim man who, on the day of the massacre showed an inspiring amount of bravery at great risk to his own safety:

*"One thing gave me a whisper of hope from all of the horror on October 7th, because one of the witnesses with whom I spoke told me that when the rocket fire first began and all of those young music-loving hippies went running into the bomb shelter, there was a Bedouin man who was a guard at the kibbutz across the street, and he ran into that same shelter for cover.*

*And as Hamas closed in on the bomb shelter, the man told the young people, shh, stay quiet, let me go talk to them. And he went outside and he said in Arabic, I'm a Muslim, everyone inside is my family, we are muslim, you don't have to search in there.*

*He tried to save them. He could have just said, I'm a Muslim and just saved himself. But he tried to do the right thing, even though it was terrifying, and even though it required unimaginable courage.*

*He was brutally beaten and the witnesses do not know what his fate was. But I take comfort for a fleeting moment, knowing that there was someone trying to do the right thing..."*

What would I have done had I been the Bedouin Arab in that situation? I am ashamed to admit that I don't know. I fear that I would have done whatever was necessary to save my own skin, and that is cowardice in the first degree.

In the Haftarah we'll read this afternoon, we'll hear the story of Jonah, the prophet who was afraid. He was afraid of doing what God wanted him to do and did everything he could to get out of it.

In the end, though, he showed the courage necessary to preach the message of repentance in Nineveh, the belly of the beast, the heart of Babylon.

### **WE HAVE SINNED AGAINST YOU BY SCORNING ISRAEL**

על חטא שחטאנו לפניך בזילזול מדינת ישראל

I understand why some Jews don't want to defend Israel in public. War is never pretty, and the consequences of Hamas's mass brutality are justifiably severe.

But this is exactly when Israel needs our support the most. So when I see a Jew wearing a mask and holding a sign that says, "This Jew says globalize the intifada," I thank God that I'm seeing a picture of that sign online and not live and in person. There are quite a few Jews who are not merely antiwar but who are anti-Israel and pro-Hamas.

A Jew who is antiwar is fine in my book, that is a defensible moral position. I don't agree with it, but it is a morally consistent stance. A Jew, however, who is anti-Israel and pro-Hamas is a shanda, a national embarrassment. A Jew who sides with Hamas desires the exile, conversion, or murder of 7 million Jews.

These anti-Israel Jews inevitably get interviewed on the news. As the old saying goes, "Dog Bites Man" is not news. "Man Bites Dog" is big news. A Jew who supports Israel is not news. A Jew who supports Hamas, that's a big story.

Look, I'm not saying that these anti-Israel Jews should be silenced. I'm simply saying that supporters of Israel should not be silent either. Every claim that the pro-Hamas Jews make has to be answered with calm and with precise facts.

Israel belongs to the Jewish people. 3,000 years of history, genetics, religion, culture, and wars have proven this to be the case. And even so, Israel is the only country whose existence the world dares to debate.

Belarus, that dictatorship in Europe? Nobody debates their existence. Iran? We rage against their government and their military, but no one suggests the country shouldn't exist. But

Israel's right to exist is declared fair game for debate. It's not a debate we want, but it is one that we must win.

We should be more like Jonah, so proud of his heritage that he was even willing to backtalk the Creator of the Universe. It was he who said to the boat passengers, עִבְרִי אֲנִי, I am a Hebrew, or as we would put it, I am a Jew.

### **WE HAVE SINNED AGAINST YOU BY ASKING THE WRONG QUESTIONS**

על חטא שחטאנו לפניך בשאלות לא נכונות

We are, you may have noticed, a nation that asks questions. For us, asking questions is a sacred endeavor. The questions we ask are always more important than the answer. An answer is one person's opinion. A question, by way of contrast, is a reflection of an entire culture's soul.

There are no stupid questions, only stupid people. There are, however, wrong questions. And we should not be shocked that when we ask the wrong questions, we get the wrong answers.

Ever since October 7th of last year, it has been common to say that it was the most vicious attack on the Jewish people since the Holocaust, and it was, there's no doubt about that. And as a result, we ask questions such as, "Why do they hate the Jews so much?" or "How can Israel hope to ever get along with people who use rape and child murder as weapons?" or "What can we do about antisemitism?"

But Harvard professor Ruth Wisse, who is now the Senior Fellow of the Tikvah Fund, says that these are all the wrong questions to ask. She warned us in a recent online discussion forum that we must not make October 7th solely about the Jews or about Israel. She says that the question is not, "What should the Jews do about anti-Jewish hatred?" but rather, "What should the world do about violent jihad?"

She makes a convincing argument that October 7th is just one example of a much wider problem, one that has nothing to do with the Jews and Israel per se. The problem is not antisemitism but rather violent jihad, the promotion of Islamic extremism through terrorism.

October 7th was a mini-Holocaust to be sure, but there have been other examples of violent jihad around the world that are October 7th's siblings and first cousins. There have been attacks in Madrid, London, Mumbai, Moscow, Boston, Nairobi, Ottawa, Copenhagen, San Bernardino, Manchester, Paris, Orlando, and, of course, our beloved New York City.

And I didn't even mention the vast number of violent jihad attacks that took place in Muslim countries. **Countries with Muslim majorities suffer from these attacks even more than we in the West do.**

I think that Professor Wisse is correct. October 7th is not just about us Jews or Israel, and we are asking the wrong questions. October 7th is only one data point in a very large connect the dots puzzle. It is obvious and yet, for some reason, controversial to say that September 11th, 2001 and October 7th, 2023 are tightly related.

It is going to take a global effort to ask the right questions, and connect all the dots and defeat the jihadis. It will be all hands on deck, because we will have to stand together with and for each other.

Asking the right questions is another theme in the Book of Jonah. Jonah gets angry that God made him look like a liar by allowing the Ninevites to live and he asks, “Isn’t this what I told you when I was in my own country?”

And Jonah learns that he asked the wrong question. The question was not, “How can I make myself look good?” but rather, “How can I convince the Ninevites to *do* good.”

### **WE HAVE SINNED AGAINST YOU BY HATING MUSLIMS**

על חטא שחטאנו לפניך בשנאת בני ישמעאל

I have it on good authority that those who commit violent acts in the name of Islam are not true Muslims.

It is, unfortunately, extremely easy to confuse Muslims with jihadis. One reason it is easy is that way too many misguided Muslims make the mistake themselves and rally with these terrorists in their midst, not seeing the deadly threat that is right under their noses. Elliot Kaufman, an editor at the Wall Street Journal, made a point about the jihadis that caught my attention. He said in the same online discussion with Ruth Wisse that the jihadis are not Muslim at all but rather pagan.

We thought that the pagans were gone, that they disappeared thousands of years ago. But in fact, Mr. Kaufman argues, we were wrong. The pagans are back, disguised as jihadis, and they wear a costume of keffiyehs and Hamas flags.

What, you may ask, makes these jihadis pagan as opposed to Muslim? He argues that pagans do not recognize the same rules of humanity to which we have become accustomed. They believe, in the words of one famous pagan, “that nothing is true and everything is permitted.”

Eventually, he says, pagans turn to human sacrifice and especially child sacrifice because they have to. Pagans inevitably sacrifice human beings because they think nothing is true and everything is permitted.

The pagans sacrifice their own adults and children by making them fight and they sacrifice our adults and children in the free world whenever they are given the chance. They believe in no limits whatsoever when it comes to war.

The pagans are our enemy, not the Muslims. We have to stop hating the Muslims both publicly and secretly. Hating Muslims is definitely a sin and it will do nothing to defeat the violent pagans.

Jonah couldn't stand the Ninevites and wanted them all dead, not forgiven and in God's good graces. God showed him that the Holy One loves all human beings, especially the repentant sinners.

There are so many more sins I could add, but I think four is enough for tonight. For all of these sins, for the sin of being cowards, the sin of scorning Israel, the sin of asking the wrong questions, and the sin of hating our Muslim cousins, O forgiving God, forgive us, pardon us, grant us atonement.

ועל כולם א-לי סליחות, סלח לנו, מחל לנו, כפר לנו