



EXODUS 34:6-7 (see also Exodus 20:5; Numbers 14:18; Deuteronomy 5:9)

Adonai passed by before him [Moses], and proclaimed: **Adonai, Adonai, God, merciful and gracious, long suffering, and abundant in lovingkindness and truth, extending lovingkindness for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, exonerating/granting pardon and not exonerating/granting pardon; visiting the sin of parents upon children, and upon children's children, to the third and fourth generation.**

BABYLONIAN TALMUD ROSH HASHANAH 17b

The verse states: *“And the Lord passed by before him, and proclaimed”* (Ex. 34:6). Rabbi Yoḥanan said: Were it not explicitly written in the verse, it would be impossible to say this, as it would be insulting to God's honor. The verse teaches that the Blessed Holy One wrapped God's self in a prayer shawl like a prayer leader and showed Moses the structure of the order of the prayer. God said to him: **Whenever the Jewish people sin, let them act before Me in accordance with this order. Let the prayer leader wrap himself in a prayer shawl and publicly recite the thirteen attributes of mercy, and I will forgive them.** The verse continues: *“The Lord, the Lord,”* and it should be understood as follows: I am God before a person sins, and I am God after a person sins and performs repentance, as God does not recall for a person his first sins, since God is always *“God, merciful and gracious”* (Ex. 34:6).



THE MAHZOR VERSION – Translation from *MAHZOR LEV SHALEM* (NY: Rabbinical Assembly, 2010)

And ADONAI passed before him and called: **ADONAI, ADONAI, God, merciful and compassionate, patient, abounding in love and faithfulness, assuring love for thousands of generations, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin, and granting pardon.**

Forgive us our transgressions and our sins; claim us for Your own.

Forgive us our creator, for we have sinned; pardon us, our sovereign, for we have transgressed – for You, ADONAI, are kind and forgiving; You act generously to all who call on You.

RABBI ELIYAHU DA VIDAS (16th century, Israel), *Reishit Hokmah, Sha'ar Anavah 1*

And I heard in the name of the *Geonim* that this is the meaning of that which they said in Tractate Rosh Hashanah regarding *“And the Lord passed before him and proclaimed, etc.”* (Exodus 34:6)...He [God] said to him: Any time that Israel sins, let them perform before Me this procedure and I shall forgive them.” And the matter is difficult because we have seen many times in which we have proclaimed the 13 attributes and [our prayers] are not answered. Rather, the *Geonim* say that the meaning of ‘let them perform before Me this procedure’ is not merely the wrapping of a *tallit*. **But instead, that they should perform the attributes which the Blessed Holy One taught to Moshe:** that God is a merciful and compassionate God. And that, just as God is compassionate, so too, you should be compassionate, etc. And likewise for all 13 attributes.

BABYLONIAN TALMUD YOMA 87b

What does one say [in order to confess]? Rav said: "You know the mysteries of the universe..." Shmuel said: "From the depths of the heart..." Levi said: "And in your Torah it is written, saying..." Rabbi Yohanan said: "Master of the Universe..." Rabbi Yehudah said: "For our iniquities are too many to count and our sins are too great to number." [More sages weigh in...] Mar Zutra said: We said these only if one did not say "But we have sinned." However, if one said "But we have sinned" one needs nothing further. As Bar Hamdudei said: I was standing before Shmuel and he was sitting; and when the prayer leader reached the words: "But we have sinned" he stood. He [Bar Hamdudei] said: **We learn from here that this is the *ikar*/essence of the *vidui*/confession.**

INTRODUCTION TO ASHAMNU ON YOM KIPPUR - *MAHZOR LEV SHALEM* (NY: Rabbinical Assembly, 2010)

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/aval *anahnu va'avoteinu* [v'imoteinu] *hatahnu*.**

INTRODUCTION TO ASHAMNU ON YOM KIPPUR - *MAHZOR HADASH* (Bridgeport, CT: PRAYER BOOK PRESS of Media Judaica, 2004 ed.: originally published 1977)

Our God and God of our ancestors, may our prayers come before You and may You not ignore our pleas. We are neither so arrogant nor so stubborn as to declare that we are righteous and have not sinned; **for indeed we have sinned/ *aval anahnu hatahnu*.**

Why did *MAHZOR LEV SHALEM* restore the original version of the prayer?

Commentaries from *Mahzor Lev Shalem*:

- Some medieval commentators note that there is a measure of solace in remembering that our ancestors were imperfect but they were forgiven. Others object to the mention that our ancestors sinned, and so in some editions that phrase is omitted.
- Nehemiah reports that in rededicating themselves, the people gathered in the Temple courtyard and 'confessed their own sins and the sins of their ancestors' (Nehemiah 9:2). Medieval authors argued that knowledge that previous generations sinned, just as we do, empowers us to ask for forgiveness—for is not our own failing part of the very nature of the human condition?



RABBI TIRZAH FIRESTONE, PhD, *Wounds into Wisdom—Healing Intergenerational Jewish Trauma* (Rhinebeck, NY: Adam Kadmon Books, Monkfish Publishing Co., 2019)

[Creative translation of "*poked avon avot*, the sins of the parents..."]: "The mind of the universe observes the wounds of parents as they ripple down to their children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren." If individual trauma is a blow to the psyche that breaks through defenses with such suddenness and force that one cannot react to it effectively, then collective trauma is a blow to the living organism that is a community. Over time, a trauma-informed worldview may become embedded in the identity of the culture. Because it involves many life experiences, the harm works its way into the awareness of a group slowly and even insidiously, bringing with it a gradual realization that the social fabric of the community no longer exists in quite the same way, that the body politic, the 'we' of the people has been irrevocably changed.



TA-NEHISI COATES

“Never forget that we were enslaved in this country longer than we have been free. Never forget that for 250 years black people were born into chains—whole generations followed by more generations who knew nothing but chains.” - from “Letter To My Son,” *The Atlantic*, July 4, 2015

“By erecting a slave society, America created the economic foundation for its great experiment in democracy... Until the U.S. pays its moral debts to African-Americans, our country will never be whole. ...The wealth gap merely puts a number on something we feel but cannot say - that American prosperity was ill-gotten and selective in its distribution. What is needed is an airing of family secrets, a settling with old ghosts. What is needed is a healing of the American psyche and the banishment of white guilt. – from “The Case for Reparations,” *The Atlantic*, June 2014

GRETA THUNBERG, age 16, from her address to the U.N.'s Climate Action Summit in New York City, 9/23/19

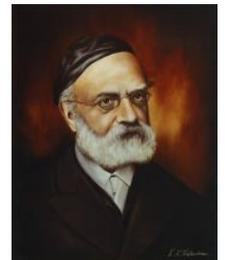


My message is that we'll be watching you. This is all wrong. I shouldn't be up here. I should be back in school on the other side of the ocean. Yet you all come to us young people for hope. How dare you! You have stolen my dreams and my childhood with your empty words. And yet I'm one of the lucky ones. People are suffering. People are dying. Entire ecosystems are collapsing. We are in the beginning of a mass extinction, and all you can talk about is money and fairy tales of eternal economic growth. How dare you! For more than 30 years, the science has been crystal clear. How dare you continue to look away and come here saying that you're doing enough, when the politics and solutions needed are still nowhere in sight. You say you hear us and that you understand the urgency. But no matter how sad and angry I am, I do not want to believe that. Because if you really understood the situation and still kept on failing to act, then you would be evil. And that I refuse to believe.

...You are failing us. But the young people are starting to understand your betrayal. The eyes of all future generations are upon you. And if you choose to fail us, I say: We will never forgive you. We will not let you get away with this. Right here, right now is where we draw the line. The world is waking up. And change is coming, whether you like it or not. Thank you.

RABBI SAMSON RAPHAEL HIRSCH (1808-1888, Founder of neo-Orthodoxy) *Commentary on the Torah* (NY: Philipp Feldheim, Publisher, 1948)

On Exodus 34:7 - [The greatest blessing one can receive is to be a sower of seeds that will blossom in the future for others] a thousand fold in time and eternity...God allows the good that a person does to become ‘buds of blessings’ for all his [her] descendants... [T]he effect of any person’s fate, or that of any nation, is not merely for one’s own individual self and for the duration of one’s own lifetime, but is felt by all one’s contemporaries as well as by the whole future.



My profound thanks to Rabbi Jan Uhrbach, Director of the Block/Kolker Center for Spiritual Arts at JTS (jauhrbach@jtsa.edu) for many of these sources, which she taught at a JTS webinar for rabbis on 9/10/19. Her presentation was entitled: “*Aval Anahnu Va'avotenu Hatanu*: Atoning for the Sins of Prior Generations?” A talented poet and liturgist, Rabbi Uhrbach also served as one of the editors of *Mahzor Lev Shalem*. I treasure Jan as a colleague and a teacher.

How persuasive do you find these arguments?

If you were editing an edition of the *mahzor*, would you include the phrase accusing our ancestors of sinning? Is that disrespectful? Or is it comforting?

Should we be held accountable for sins committed by past generations?

Should we excuse previous generations for “not knowing better”? Or are there limits?

What sins, if any, are passed down from generation to generation?

What sins of ours might outlive us?

וַיַּעֲבֹר ה' וְעַל־פְּנֵי וַיִּקְרָא ה' ה'

אַל רַחוּם וְחַנוּן אֶרֶץ אֲפִים וְרַב־חֶסֶד וְאֶמֶת

וַיִּצַר חֶסֶד לְאֲלֹפִים נִשָּׂא עֵוֹן וְנִפְשַׁע וְחַטָּאָה

וְנִקְהָה לֹא וְנִקְהָה פִּקֵּד וְעֵוֹן אָבוֹת עַל־בָּנִים

וְעַל־בָּנֵי בָנִים עַל־שִׁלְשִׁים וְעַל־רַבְעִים