

AI Chet for Racial Injustice

HILL HAVURAH

Introduction for 5782-5783 Selichot Season

excerpt from Hill Havurah's "Selichot Toward Anti-Racism" for 5782-83
Full PDF version available via HillHavurah.org

Sins between humans and the Divine, we are taught, can be resolved directly with the Divine.

Sins between one human and another require that we first address the harm and make amends before seeking Divine forgiveness through confession and atonement.

True atonement for sins of racial injustice requires learning, confession, and reparations.

And, like any sin between humans, the path to atonement is neither simple nor quick, and reconciliation often takes longer than we might expect or desire.

Hill Havurah's AI Chet for Racial Injustice invites us to consider how injustice manifests in our lives, what we need to learn to understand its harms and begin to address it, and what will be required for reparation and, eventually, reconciliation.

Jewish tradition has long recognized the importance of confession but holds that it is but one step toward atonement.

This *al chet* invites reflection and calls us to consider next steps -- even one commitment toward learning and action for the coming year.

As a community we will find ways to share our aspirations and check in with one another on our progress during the year, so that we approach NEXT Yom Kippur from a new vantage point, as individuals and as a community.

Hill Havurah's "Selichot Toward Anti-Racism" Supplement (originally created in 2020, updated 2022) -- available this year in PDF form and excerpted here -- also encourages us to reflect in who is "we" or "us" at any point in our prayers, particularly when considering sins of racism.

"We," Race, and Confession

The Ashkenazi *Machzor* has long included two lists of sins, both in plural formats:

The "short confessional," or "*Ashamnu*," is an alphabet list "*Ashamnu, bagadnu, gazalnu...* [We have trespassed, **We** have betrayed, **We** have stolen...]."

The "long confessional" or "*Al Chet*" is a double acrostic, listing 44 sins in the form "*Al chet shechatanu l'fanecha...* [For the sin **we** have committed before You...]"

"We," Race, and Confession (cont.)

That plural "we" is generally explained in several ways:

- reflecting an ancient understanding of Jews as one body, who "collectively own" any errors committed by community members;
- acknowledging that all Jews are responsible, one for the other, and reminding us of the commandment to give and receive *tochekha* [rebuke or admonition];
- emphasizing collective responsibility for societal conditions that result in sin;
- recognizing how our fates are all intertwined.

But what about the sins of racism, in particular?

Any of us might trespass, betray, or steal, but we are not equally susceptible to sins of racism: Some of us are primary targets of systemic racism, still experiencing active harm, while others of us continue to benefit from, and participate in perpetuating, structures that favor us. So, do we "collectively own" sins of racism?

How do we understand responsibilities to give and receive rebuke in regard to sins of racism?

Knowing what a large role race has played in our fates and in our experiences of societal shortcomings, how can multicultural Jewish communities rise together to confess sins of racism?

In the long view, if we recognize that racism weighs disparately on different community members, can we stand together united in "our wrestling match with history"?

Al Chet for Racial Justice

Al chet shechatanu l'fanecha -- for the sins we have committed,

by believing that what benefits us personally is a universal benefit, without harm to others.
and by believing that whatever doesn't benefit or interest us is unimportant.

by believing that whatever is not a problem for us personally is not in need of attention;
and by believing that what ails us is a universal problem in need of immediate attention.

by expecting Jewish perspectives to be understood in spaces we often avoid and rarely engage;
and by treating Black Lives Matter as optional concerns for Jews and Jewish institutions.

by prioritizing predominantly white Jewish communities' concerns;
and by believing that, even in Black liberation work, white people are entitled to direct.

by taking "good" and "bad" neighborhoods for granted and expecting to live in a "good" one;
and by accepting as givens disparities across Rock Creek Park and the Anacostia River.

by participating in, and benefiting from, the displacement of Black residents and culture;
and by enjoying Black culture without supporting Black individuals and communities.

by failing to notice and respond in the face of daily, mundane bigotry and bias;
and by responding in ways that make us feel good but don't make targeted people safer.

by failing to examine our own explicit and implicit biases;
and by failing to recognize the pain of constant exposure to bias.

V'al kulam Eloha selichot, s'lach lanu, m'chal lanu, ka-per lanu:
For all these sins, forgiving God: forgive us, pardon us, grant us atonement.

Al chet shechatanu l'fanecha -- for the sins we have committed,

by allowing "antisemitic" to be deployed as a weapon in some cases and not in others;
and by allowing antisemitism to go unchecked in the name of coalition or solidarity.

by missing how "we were all immigrants!" erases indigenous and formerly enslaved people;
and by separating immigration, policing, and bigotry toward Black and brown people.

by refusing to acknowledge privilege in our health and health care, wealth, and education;
and by accepting narratives that attribute "success" to right choices and hard work.

by opting to protect our families and businesses without regard for those who lack those choices;
and by discounting the struggles of people who don't face the same options that we do.

by relying for safety on systems, including police, courts, and jails, that do not protect us all;
and by critiquing others' participation in systems they are not at liberty to ignore.

by failing to grapple with white supremacist policy in law, economy and other structures;
and by failing to learn and honor the history of resistance and anti-racism.

by equating hurt feelings in political discussion with death, injury, and harassment by the state;
by dismissing the impact of dehumanizing language and images.

V'al kulam Eloha selichot, s'lach lanu, m'chal lanu, ka-per lanu:
For all these sins, forgiving God: forgive us, pardon us, grant us atonement.

Al chet shechatanu l'fanecha -- for the sins we have committed,

by citing involvement in the Civil Rights Movement as a universal commitment among Jews;
and by taking credit for actions of Jews in decades past without acting ourselves today.

by honoring Rabbi A.J. Heschel's image but not his battle with "the evil of indifference."
and by still "lacking a sense of the *monstrosity of inequality*," and the "blasphemy" of racism.

by claiming "my feet were praying," like Heschel did at Selma, without regard to the context;
and by failing to emulate Heschel's pre-Selma activism and relationship with Black leaders.

by limiting our social justice engagement to quoting Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.;
and by quoting King but not addressing the "triple evils of poverty, racism, and militarism."

by treating King's particular approach to public protest as the only acceptable method;
and by confusing permitted, police-protected marches with confronting police, then or now.
by equating white protesters' voluntary risk with systemic threats to Black and brown people;
and by dividing protesters into "good" and "bad" based on their treatment of property.
by thinking we're already "progressive" or "woke" enough to deserve a break;
and by thinking we have the answers and can somehow fix it all.

V'al kulam Eloha selichot, s'lach lanu, m'chal lanu, ka-per lanu:
For all these sins, forgiving God: forgive us, pardon us, grant us atonement.

Forgive us, too, and pardon us and grant us atonement,
al chet shechatanu l'fanecha -- for the sins we have committed,

by asking a Jew about conversion or expecting everyone to share in "Jewish geography";
and by indulging in the urge to categorize and in curiosity where it was not invited.
by using "Jew" to mean "white Ashkenazi Jew of European descent (resembling Mel Brooks)";
and by treating Sammy Davis Jr. as a punchline and Tiffany Haddish and Drake as "variety."
by centering, and re-centering, ourselves and what we find comfortable as "standard Judaism,"
and by failing to learn and celebrate and support the vastness of our true community.

V'al kulam Eloha selichot, s'lach lanu, m'chal lanu, ka-per lanu:
For all these sins, forgiving God: forgive us, pardon us, grant us atonement.



<https://HillHavurah.org>