



Why Would I Ever Want to Feel Guilty?

Is Excessive Guilt a Jewish Phenomenon?

I remember my parents' candy cabinet. It was the top section of the antique, polished, solid, oak-wooden cupboard. This section even had a key, but I don't know why it was never locked. Its shelves were bursting with sweets from an assortment of licorice to Anton Berg's marzipan and various bags of candy. As far as I can remember back, I had a penchant for sweets, perhaps, I was even born with a sweet tooth. By the age of seven, I had developed a method for extracting candies from closed candy bags without my mother noticing that the bag had been opened. I would simply slide the candies out from a narrow slit on the edge of the bag. When my mother looked away, I would stand on a stool while using this method to steal just one candy, leaving the bag looking new and unopened. The problem was that I often repeated this procedure until – to my great dismay – I discovered that the bag was nearly empty. When my mother later inquired who had stolen the candies, my confession was written on the guilty expression of my face. I'm not the only one to have struggled with a guilty conscience. The claim that especially Jews harbor feelings of shame and guilt is well known in both literature and humor. "What's Jewish Alzheimer's disease? It's when you forget everything but the guilt" is an example of one such joke emphasizing Jewish guilt. According to Simon Dein, in *Journal of Spirituality in Mental Health, US National Library of Medicine, National Institutes of Health*, guilt and Judaism are closely interlinked with a long historical legacy. Through psychoanalytic, theological, and cultural examination, he concludes that 'guilt' is deeply ingrained in Jewish culture. More than guilt being a problem, it is second nature to the Jews, particularly through the guilt-inflicting Jewish mother. [*The Origins of Jewish Guilt: Psychological, Theological, and Cultural Perspectives*](#). According to Rabbi Tzvi Freeman such stereotypes about Jewish guilt, have no basis in reality. As early as 1964, a study in the American Midwest reported higher levels of guilt among Protestants and Catholics than among their Jewish cohorts. Rabbi Tzvi also personally asked several therapists with many Jewish patients. They all concur that excessive, crippling guilt does not appear to be a particularly Jewish phenomenon.

https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/417253/jewish/Jewish-Guilt.htm

The Purpose of Feeling Guilty

Shame and guilt are related. The Hebrew word for guilt *חַטָּא*/*ashma* is similar to the English word 'shame.' Both involve feeling bad about ourselves. Whereas shame is a general feeling of not living up to our potential, guilt is usually associated with a particular action. From the very first people in the world – Adam and Eve – the feeling of guilt became ingrained within humanity. After having disobeyed G-d's command, they were overcome by the feeling of guilt, so they tried to hide from Hashem (*Bereishit* 3:8). Evading taking responsibility for their sin caused them to turn their guilt into blame (*Ibid.* 12-13). Since then, we all struggle with this inborn tendency to blame, rather than taking responsibility for our actions. In our quest to avoid pain, we may also try to hide and cover up, not even admitting our wrongdoing to ourselves. In the following Bible-chapter, Hashem provides guidance for how to deal with our negative impulse and possible consequent sin. When Kain felt guilty about being jealous, because Hashem only accepted his brother's sacrifice, Hashem empowers him to mend his ways: "If you improve your deeds, you will be forgiven. But if you do not improve, sin will be crouching in wait for you to the grave. It yearns to make you stumble, but you can rule over it" (*Bereishit* 4:7). It is natural and unavoidable at

times to feel angry, irritated, jealous and moody, yet it is our responsibility to work on not letting these feelings get the better of us. Feeling guilty for negative emotions is beneficial and is meant to prompt us to avoid acting upon them. Just as Hashem told Kain, "You can rule over it," we too can contain our negative feelings without acting upon them. When we succeed, we can release the feeling of guilt, knowing that we have gained complete forgiveness as Kain was promised. Although Kain fell deeply into cardinal sin, at least he took responsibility for his action by confessing: "Is my iniquity too great to bear?" (*Bereishit* 4:13). Consequently, Hashem placed His mark of protection upon him (*Ibid* 15). If Hashem mitigates the punishment of even a murderer because he took responsibility and admitted his sin, how-much-more-so will He forgive us for whatever wrongdoing we may have committed (Based on Rabbi Tzvi Freeman, [Jewish Guilt A Guide For Healthy Maintenance](#)).

Transient Guilt as a Tool for Repentance

Guilt can serve a powerful social function in terms of controlling our behavior, as long as we are aware of our inherent ability to do good. A temporary guilt feeling is a result of realizing that we were wrong. Yet, believing that our nature is evil will not help us to resist the temptation to do evil. Judaism empowers us to know our innate goodness and helps us to use the initial guilt for self-improvement. Lingering guilt is not a Jewish emotion. Rather, it is the first step of the teshuva process. When we channel this initial guilt feeling into 'regret' we are on the way to total repentance. Teshuva is comprised of three steps: 1) remorse, 2) confession, and 3) resolution for the future. Remorse stems from a yearning to come close to G-d, and the agony of realizing that we have become distant from the source of life. This regret causes an even greater love for G-d than before, like a husband and wife who make up after a dispute. Experiencing deep feelings of regret purifies the spiritual stain on our soul caused by the forbidden pleasure. It also transforms our wrongdoing into merits, since they are what cause us to become even closer to Hashem. This explains why Parashat Tzav teaches us that the guilt offering is called "holy of holies."

ספר ויקרא פרק ז (א) וְזֹאת תֹּרַת הָאֵשֶׁת קֹדֶשׁ קֹדָשִׁים הוּא: (ה) וְהַקִּטִּיר אֹתָם הַכֹּהֵן הַמִּזְבֵּחַ אֵשֶׁה לַיהוָה אֵשֶׁת הוּא: (ו) וְקֹדֶשׁ קֹדָשִׁים הוּא:

"This is the law of the guilt offering. It is a holy of holies... And the kohen shall cause them to [go up in] smoke on the altar as a fire offering to Hashem. It is a guilt offering... It is a holy of holies (*Vayikra* 7:1-6).

Just as the initial feeling of guilt evaporates when the guilt offering goes up in flames, likewise, today there is no need to hold on to guilt feelings as long as we take responsibility for our actions. [Here are five ways to help us release excessive guilt and make positive changes in our lives.](#)