

***Communal Confessions: Reckoning with
Injustice in Israel-Palestine***



***A resource for the Days of Awe from
Independent Jewish Voices Canada***

Overview

It is traditional in the time between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, known as the “Days of Awe,” to reflect on the past year, repent, and seek forgiveness. The traditional liturgy focuses on confessing our transgressions during the Days of Awe. Even if they are not transgressions that we have committed personally, everyone seeks forgiveness as part of the community.

Independent Jewish Voices (IJV) and IfNotNow Toronto collaborated to create an alternative version of some of the traditional transgressions to focus them on the injustice in Israel-Palestine. For each of those transgressions, examples have been added to illustrate the real ways Palestinian people are affected.

How to Use this Resource

- ❖ Gather with family and friends or create a solemn space for you to recite it to yourself.
- ❖ In some traditions, people wear white during the High Holiday period to signal that this is a time of peaceful reflection, seek inner purity and represent a clean start.
- ❖ It is traditional to use your fist to gently beat the heart side of your chest for each transgression that is spoken or read.
- ❖ To mirror the traditional service, there are ‘call and response’ elements of this resource. This means that if it’s being done in a group, one person can read out the transgressions, and everyone else can respond. When we are hearing the transgressions, the response is “ashamnu,” Hebrew for “we are guilty.”
- ❖ Another tradition at this time of year is known as “tashlich”, which translates to “you shall cast away.” The practice is to go to a body of water (preferably free flowing, like a river or stream), and to symbolically release the negative aspects from the past year to be carried away by the water. You can do this by throwing leaves or twigs into the water while reflecting for yourself on what they represent—what you want to let go from the past year to start the new year with a fresh, positive approach. This guide includes a notation for where you can include tashlich in this service, if you wish, but it is not part of the traditional confession service.

Introduction (read aloud)

The days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are traditionally a time of reflection. A time to take stock of the year that we are closing out and set our intentions for the year ahead.

The tradition teaches that this is both an individual pursuit and a communal accounting of our action and inaction. One of the prayers that is said at this time is the “Vidui” which is Hebrew for confessions. It includes long lists of sins and transgressions. While they may not all apply to all of us, we continue to recite them as generations of Jewish people have done before us and are doing along with us in communities around the world. We acknowledge that we are connected as a community and so we take accountability as a community.

In this time of reflecting on harms, even the ones that don’t apply to us, how can Jews of conscience not also think about the conditions the Israeli state imposes on Palestinians? How, in this time of communal accounting for sins, can we ignore the role of the diaspora in holding Israel to account for those conditions?

The confessions we recite give us the words: We are guilty. We have stolen. We have been violent. We have been immoral. We have done the abhorrent. We have oppressed. We have gone astray.

We cannot seek forgiveness for actions that we are continuing to do. So we cannot seek forgiveness, at this time, for the harms being committed in Israel-Palestine. But we should at least name them. We should carry over the ancient tradition and apply it to current circumstances. We should use this time of reflection to acknowledge the harms and to educate people who may not know of them.

We are here together to call out some of the sins that have been committed in our name by people and institutions claiming to act on our behalf while they oppress, degrade, dispossess, and kill Palestinians.

Everyone together:

May the spirit of justice guide us in the new year so that we may open our ears to truth, open our hearts to the oppressed, and speak our minds courageously to stop our community’s complicity in oppression and suffering of the Palestinian people.

Justice for Palestine Vidui (confession):

A reader will recite the transgressions; the group will respond where indicated.

Bagadnu בַּגְדָנוּ (betrayal)

We have betrayed Jewish values by failing to acknowledge the humanity and rights of the Palestinians. Even the most basic needs are withheld from Palestinian families in their own communities. In their own words:

- ❖ From a 13-year-old boy: “[The Israeli Civil Administration] gave the school a demolition order after it was built. There is a court case about it now. I hope it will not be demolished. This school is our only hope. If they demolish it, then all will be lost.”

Everyone: ashamnu

- ❖ “My six-year-old daughter was panicking and screaming ‘I don’t want to die’... we were sleeping when the Israeli settlers attacked our village with stones. I opened the door and saw around 30 masked settlers about 30 meters away. They were accompanied by two heavily armed soldiers. My daughter is still struggling. She has nightmares and cannot sleep at night. She often wakes up panicking and screaming, ‘a settler is choking me.’”

Everyone: ashamnu

- ❖ Each year, 500 to 700 Palestinian children, as young as 12 years old, are detained and prosecuted in the military court system.

Everyone: ashamnu

Gazalnu גַּזְלָנוּ (robbery)

- ❖ We have participated in the theft of Palestinian land by supporting the Jewish National Fund (JNF) and the ever-expanding Israeli settlements. The tools of state violence and dispossession can sometimes be hidden in less obvious forms. JNF convinced kids they were doing something noble by planting trees, but it was to mask evidence of expelled Arab villages.

Everyone: ashamnu

- ❖ Within Area C, an area that covers about 60% of the Palestinian West Bank, rules are vastly different for Jewish settlements than Palestinian communities. Less than 1% of the area is officially planned by Israel for Palestinian development, a requirement for building permits. Between 2009 and 2018, only 2% of all requests made by Palestinians were granted. Israel then uses the lack of permits as a pretence to demolish and confiscate structures - homes, schools, water tanks, solar panels, livestock pens.

Everyone: ashamnu

Chamasnu חָמָסְנוּ (acting zealously)

In our zeal to protect Israel, we have misused charges of antisemitism.

- ❖ In a national opinion survey of Jewish Canadians conducted in 2018, almost 48% of Jewish respondents said that they believe accusations of antisemitism are often used to silence legitimate criticism of Israeli government policies. This played out in Toronto when author and activist Desmond Cole was invited to the Toronto District School Board to talk about anti racism and equity. As part of his presentation he spoke about the TDSB as an environment hostile to Palestinian perspectives and used the phrase “Free Palestine”. After the second session, a letter was sent out by the TDSB director to staff, distancing the board from the presentations. Some Jewish organizations publicly demonized Desmond, accusing him of antisemitism.

Everyone: ashamnu

- ❖ The annual audit of antisemitic incidents released by B’nai Brith uses the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance definition of antisemitism to decide what should be included in their count. By conflating all criticism of Israel with actual antisemitism, this audit makes Canadian Jews feel less safe and more vulnerable than they actually are. This is bad for Canadian Jews but good for Canadian Jewish organizations that fundraise off this fear.

Everyone: ashamnu

Tafalnu Sheker טַפְּלֵנוּ שֶׁקֶר (lying)

We have distorted and denied the truth about Israeli crimes against humanity and justified policies such as the withholding of water, medicine, and necessities to the people of the West Bank and Gaza. A 2018 study found that 26% of illnesses in Gaza can be tied to water pollution.

Everyone: ashamnu

- ❖ The average consumption of water per person per day for Palestinians in the West Bank is 82.4 litres. For Israelis, including those in the settlements, they use 247 litres per person per day. In Palestinian communities that are not given access to the water grid, average daily consumption per person is a mere 26 litres, much like the average in disaster zones.

Everyone: ashamnu

- ❖ The Palestinian Red Crescent Society reported 93% of its ambulance transfers with acutely unwell passengers experience “time consuming delays” of 10 minutes or more at checkpoints due to Israeli security protocols.

Everyone: ashamnu

Pashanu פָּשַׁעְנוּ (perverting justice)

We have wrongfully exerted influence on Canadian institutions so as to prevent legitimate criticism of Israel’s treatment of Palestinians.

- ❖ In the spring of 2023, the Government of Canada decided to use an anti-racism framework to assess funding applications to the Department of Canadian Heritage/Patrimoine canadien. The framework indirectly includes the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance definition of antisemitism. This was undoubtedly presented to the government as a way to protect Canadian Jews, but all it will likely do is penalize and stigmatize organizations that draw attention to human rights abuses in Israel and fuel anti-Palestinian racism in Canada.

Everyone: ashamnu

Kishinu Oref קִשְׁיָנוּ עֶרֶף (stubbornness)

Despite mounting evidence that the occupation has become permanent, and despite the fact that Palestinians under occupation have no vote in the government that effectively rules them, we continue to claim that Israel is a democratic state.

- ❖ The Israeli Knesset passed a law that Israeli Arabs, citizens of Israel, cannot extend citizenship and permanent residency rights to their spouses if they are Palestinian from the West Bank or Gaza. In contrast, Jews can move from North America and become Israeli citizens.

Everyone: ashamnu

- ❖ As of March 2023, 1,002 Palestinians are in administrative detention in Israeli jails without trial and often without any idea why they are there.

Everyone: ashamnu

- ❖ The Jewish Nation State law, passed in 2018, commits to expanding Jewish settlement as a national value. Meanwhile, the Land and Acquisition Law has been used to expropriate 1200-1300 square kilometres of land from the Arab population.

Everyone: ashamnu

Tainu תָּעִינוּ (straying from a righteous path)

We have abandoned the fight for justice by refusing to acknowledge the Nakba - the ongoing Palestinian experience of expulsion and dispossession.

- ❖ In Israel, the Nakba law allows the government to reduce state funding or support to an institution if it holds an activity that rejects Israel as a Jewish and democratic state or that recognizes Israel's Independence Day as a day of mourning for Palestinians. This denies the reality of the impact the establishment of the state had on the people who were already living there. It prevents Palestinians from acknowledging and reflecting on their own history. In Canada, we do not have this denial codified in laws but the stories and histories we learn in Jewish days schools, in synagogues, or Jewish cultural settings, erase those experiences by omitting or outright rejecting those truths.

Everyone: ashamnu

Titanu תַּעֲתֵנוּ (causing others to stray from righteousness)

We have caused others to stray from righteousness by miseducating our community and our children about Israel's role in the Nakba and Palestinian suffering alongside the history of Jewish suffering.

- ❖ In October 2021, the Israeli defence ministry designated 6 human rights and civil society organizations as “terrorist organizations”. Israel sent a report to other world governments and international organizations with these accusations. Even though none of the claims could be substantiated by other governments, this August, Israeli military raided the offices of “the six”, stole material and welded the offices shut. Without these organizations, the lived experiences of Palestinians and the brutality of the Israeli state would be further hidden from view of the world.

Everyone: ashamnu

- ❖ Media outlets prioritize Jewish and Israeli narratives over those of Palestinians. When Shireen Abu Akleh was shot and killed wearing visible press protective gear, Israel claimed that she was killed by Palestinian gunfire. Other journalists who had been with her contested that explanation. Israel accused the Palestinian Authority of hindering the investigation when the PA was rightly reluctant to trust Israel. The US State Department claimed the bullet was too damaged for conclusive evidence, despite all the eye witness accounts. Once Israel concluded their investigation, their position is that it's possible Shireen was “accidentally” killed by Israeli soldiers, but that there would be no further investigation as “there is no suspicion that a criminal offence was committed”.

Everyone: ashamnu

If you want to add tashlich

Now that we have communally acknowledged transgressions that have taken us away from the righteous path, we will take a moment for more personal reflections. It is a time to consider the negative feelings, missteps or regrets of the past year. Allow

yourself to forgive and commit to starting the new year unburdened and prepared to not repeat the same mistakes.

If you are by a body of water, collect sticks, leaves or pebbles, whatever you can find that is safe for the wildlife, symbolically transfer to them the negative thoughts and release them to be carried away by the water.

Looking to the year ahead

A reader will recite the commitments for the new year; the group will respond where indicated.

Knowing that we are limited in our ability to influence Israeli state actions, we can focus our efforts on the commitments we can make for the year ahead, within our own communities.

In this season of atonement, we must take an ethical stand:

- ❖ Move our religious, educational and cultural institutions to acknowledge and speak truthfully about the Palestinian *Nakba* (catastrophe).

Everyone: tzedek, tzedek tirdof; Justice, justice we shall pursue

- ❖ Stop our Jewish institutions from attacking and maligning those who speak their conscience about Israeli violence and dispossession.

Tzedek, tzedek tirdof; Justice, justice we shall pursue

- ❖ Put an end to the vilification of fellow Jews who name and oppose Israel's violations of Palestinian human rights.

Tzedek, tzedek tirdof; Justice, justice we shall pursue

- ❖ Stop our Jewish communal institutions from funding organizations that promote Islamophobia.

Tzedek, tzedek tirdof; Justice, justice we shall pursue

- ❖ End Jewish communal funding for organizations that support and enable illegal Jewish settlements on occupied Palestinian land.

Tzedek, tzedek tirdof; Justice, justice we shall pursue

Conclusion

At this time of year, there are many ways to express our hopes for the year ahead. In Hebrew: “L’shana tova u’metukah” - may you have a good and sweet year or “g’mar chatimah tova” may you be inscribed for a good year (in the Book of Life). The Ladino expression “Anyada Buena, Dulce i Alegre” means may you have a good, sweet and happy New Year.

Whatever the language, may we all go into the new year with hope and determination for bringing justice and peace where it is needed.