

## Public Life, Public Confession and Yom Kippur

**By Brad Hirschfield**

Recent news reports indicate that the State of Israel will include, in high school history books, information on the 1956 shooting by Israeli soldiers of 47 residents of the Israeli Arab village of Kafr Kassem on the eve of the 1956 Sinai campaign. The incident at Kfar Kassem marked a dark moment in Israeli history and an especially dark moment in the relations between Israeli Arabs and Jews.

It was one of those moments that official histories typically tend to overlook or minimize because they do not fit so well with the stories we like to tell about ourselves. Hence the significance of the decision to treat this difficult matter in the high school classroom. For the willingness to grapple openly and directly with Kfar Kassem means the end of an official history of Israel in which Jews are always right, and others are always wrong.

For many Jews - both in Israel and in the Diaspora -- this revision of the history books is not an easy thing to swallow. They are in love with the image of an Israel in which the Jewish people are always fighting the good fight against the forces of hatred and destruction. They long for an Israel whose attractiveness is guaranteed by its moral perfection and they believe that the official history must demonstrate this perfection at every turn. These lovers of Israel are in love with the ideal vision of what Israel can be, but do not want to hear that it has ever fallen short. At the other end of the spectrum are those who would abandon their support for Israel in the face of these "new" facts. Of course, these two positions are actually two sides of the same coin. They each demand a false purity from the community.

For me, Israel's move to embrace a larger slice of its own history is courageous and a sign of remarkable health. It bespeaks the moral maturity of a people that is unwilling to guarantee its moral purity by surrendering power, a purity whose painful down-side we understand all too well. Nor will this people hide from the wrongs that can only be committed by those who possess real power. Instead it will rely upon the ancient wisdom of atonement, of Yom Kippur.

In the days of the Temple, the people came together at least once each year to acknowledge its darker doings. Yom Kippur was the day on which we entered the sacred precincts of the Temple in Jerusalem not because we were morally blameless, but in order to acknowledge our shortcomings before God before letting them go. We had to admit who we really were, before we could become who we hoped to be. But of course, then as now, Yom Kippur primarily focused upon the sins and moral failings of the individual in his or her private life or private capacity. Not much attention was paid to sins or moral lapses of the people in its public capacity. Given the form of political organization and the

aristocratic nature of public life in Temple times (and subsequently), this is hardly surprising.

But now we are a global people with unprecedented political, military, and economic power. We need a Yom Kippur that can address the sins and shortcomings not only of our individual private lives, but of our collective public life as well. In fact, we may well need a Yom Kippur for the latter even more. How will Israel create this next level of Yom Kippur? How will we in the Diaspora? What rituals, texts, songs and practices can we make use of? Can we imagine the members of the Knesset enacting a Yom Kippur ritual for the political sins that had been committed in the previous year?

Whatever form this collective Yom Kippur might take, I know that on that day there must be an honest acknowledgment of how we have acted as a people and as a polity. No matter how ugly these stories may be, these stories must be told. Without this process we will be like a giant ostrich with its head in the sand - like a very powerful ostrich with no sense of its own destructive capacity. Even sadder, we would fail to notice our very powerful creative capacity as well. Acknowledging the one is closely linked to freeing the creative potential of the other.

Something analogous is required in the Jewish community of North America. We must find a way of overcoming the false perfectionism that is premised upon the repression of our collective shortcomings. We, too, must acknowledge the totality of the people we are. We can only become the people we hope to be when we have created a space within which we can acknowledge the truth about the kind of people we already are.