

Our Father, merciful Father, you have visited upon us a daily torrent of retribution, famine, sword, fear and panic. In the morning, we say, "If only it were evening," and in the evening we say, "If only it were morning." No one knows who among Your people Israel, Your flock, will survive and who will fall victim to plunder and abuse.

We beg of You, our Father in Heaven, restore Israel to their precincts, sons to their mothers' embrace, fathers to sons. Bring peace to the world and remove the evil wind that has come to rest upon Your creatures.

In his novel about the Lodz Ghetto, Swedish author Steve Sen-Sandberg (See Steve Sen-Sanberg, translated by Sarah Death, "The Emperor of Lies, Farrar, Straus and Geroux (2011), page 284, Adapted, See <https://www.amazon.com/Emperor-Lies-Novel-Steve-Sem-Sandberg-ebook/dp/B004WJR7YC>) attributes this prayer to a scribbling on the wall of a prayer room on Podrzeczna Street at the approach of Rosh Hashanah and the Day of Atonement, 1941.

Sen-Sandberg writes about a community on the precipice. Starvation, disease, overwork, deportation, death are imminent.

Tonight, as we begin 25 hours of fast, prayer, and introspection, we too are on the precipice. Our conditions are different than those of Lodz. But our concerns for family, friends, Israel, and the world are similar.

As stated in the U-Netaneh Tokef, All that lives on earth will pass before God. God will judge each living being and inscribe their destiny. On Rosh Hashannah it is written and on Yom Kippur, it is sealed.

"But T'shuvah [repentance], T'fillah [prayer], and Tz'dakah [charity or justice] have the power to transform the harshness of our destiny."

How does transformation work? Once we have identified our sins – individually and communally, how can we use the powers of T'shuvah, T'fillah, and Tz'dakah to Transform the harshness of our destiny?"

In 1994, South Africa achieved majority rule and abolished Apartheid, the rigid, oppressive separation of the races. This achievement was the result of negotiations and compromise between the outgoing White minority government, and the multi-racial, militant African National Congress.

The deal breaker or deal maker was the prosecution of abuses of human rights.

The outgoing White minority government did not want its people to be punished. The African National Congress wanted justice. The compromise was a Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu, then head of the Anglican Church in South Africa, was

chair of the Commission. A white social activist, Alex Boraine, former president of the Methodist Church in Southern Africa was vice chair.

Lyn S. Graybill, who taught African politics at the University of Virginia, (See: Lyn S. Graybill, South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission: Ethical and Theological Perspectives, Ethics and International Affairs, March 1998, pages 374-376, Adapted, See <http://www.nyu.edu/classes/gmoran/SOAFRICA.pdf>), reported that the hearings resembled a church service more than a judicial proceeding, with Archbishop Tutu dressed in his purple clerical robes, clearly operating as a religious figure. Secular academics criticized the very framing of the issue in terms of repentance and forgiveness, which they saw as uniquely Christian concepts.

An interfaith service was held at St. George's Cathedral in Cape Town. Commissioners received a candle and an olive branch ---symbols of truth and peace. Jewish, Christian, Buddhist, Muslim, and traditional African religious leaders blessed the Commissioners who stood in a semi-circle as they stood in a semi-circle with their lighted candles."

At the first session of the Commission, Archbishop Tutu explained that the Commission would constitute a sacramental ritual of "contrition, confession, and forgiveness" which would contribute to a "corporate nationwide process of healing."

Archbishop Tutu knew, as did our ancient and medieval rabbis who constructed the liturgy of the Machzor [High Holiday prayerbook], about the power of prayer – T'fillah – and rituals rich with symbols to bring community together and invite them into the process of transformation.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission had three functions: first, recognition; second, confession; and third, reparations.

First: Victims told their stories, unfettered by legal formalities such as cross examination, rules of evidence, and burden of proof.

Second: Perpetrators, both Government and opposition, both White and Black, explained their crimes. They could apply for amnesty providing that their crimes were in pursuit of a political ends. Common criminals such as bank robbers were not eligible for amnesty.

Third: The new majority Government granted reparations to victims, in forms ranging from cash, scholarships, and day care or recognition such as street namings and building of community libraries.

It is here, in the Commission's three goals, that we see the power of Tz'dakah to transform the harshness of one's destiny. Tz'dakah is often understood as *charity*,

but it is more correctly and literally translated as *justice*. When we restore the balance of Justice to those whom we, individually or communally, have wronged, both sides are transformed.

On November 18, 1999 the late Cyril Harris, then Chief Rabbi of the Orthodox community testified before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. (See http://www.religion.uct.ac.za/sites/default/files/image_tool/images/113/Institutes/Archives/submissions/Jewish_Community.pdf, Adapted). He stated:

The Jewish community did not initiate apartheid. Many in the Jewish community did not agree with apartheid. Almost everyone in the Jewish community had a kind of awkward tension about apartheid, but most of the Jewish community benefited in one way or another from apartheid.

The Chief Rabbi noted that some of the most prominent activists against Apartheid were of Jewish origin---many acting from humanitarian motivations more than from Jewish values---and that the Jewish community always voted heavily against the National Party, the party of Apartheid.

The Chief Rabbi confessed about the "silence" of the Jewish community.

It is insufficient to stand apart from violations of human rights. Dissociation is inadequate where vocal protest is urgently called for. Positive steps must be taken to rectify injustice.

The Jewish community in South Africa, confesses a collective failure to protest against apartheid. The situation was not one in which the human rights of the minority were adversely affected. That in itself would have been wrong. It was a situation in which the human rights of the vast majority were systematically and forcibly denied and that is a monstrous aberration.

Noting that Jews have been "*the most consistent victims among the people of the world*," the Chief Rabbi said that "*Jewish moral teaching, together with the essential lesson of Jewish historical experience should have moved the community to do everything possible to oppose apartheid. Distancing oneself from the anguished cry of the majority in one's own midst and myopically pursuing one's own interests, whether personal or communal, can never be morally justified.*

The Chief Rabbi's powerful statements remind us of the transformational power of T'shuvah. When we look within ourselves and confess what he have discovered --- only then can we TRANSFORM ourselves and join with our fellow human beings to TRANSFORM our larger society.

The Chief Rabbi continued

Abraham Joshua Heschel once wrote, "Indifference to evil is more insidious than evil

itself. Indifference is more universal, more contagious, more dangerous. Indifference is silent justification. Indifference makes possible an evil erupting as an exception, becoming accepted."

Chief Rabbi Harris continued:

Because of the evil of indifference which so many in the Jewish community professed, we confess that sin today before this commission and we ask forgiveness for it.

T'shuvah, T'fillah, and Tz'dakah have the power to transform.

As we go through our introspection tonight and tomorrow, we can draw guidance and insight from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

We should acknowledge that our pain and our worries are legitimate.

We should appreciate the redemptive quality of confession.

We should make reparations to those whom we have harmed.

The prayer from the Lodz Ghetto resonates tonight:

*May it be Your will,
You who hear the beseechings of Your petitioners
to hearken unto the heart-felt pleadings that emanate from our hearts*

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May all who seek refuge with You experience neither shame nor disgrace. May God redeem the righteous summarily, promptly and speedily, and let us say, Amen.