

## Guilt-edged security

By Ruth Ostrow

I'M sitting here feeling guilty. Today is the Jewish Day of Atonement. The one day of the year when we confess our sins to a higher source while fasting and asking for forgiveness. The one day Jewish psychologists would condone anyone feeling guilty about everything.

And there's plenty to feel guilty about. Pages and pages of things listed in the prayer book. The point being that by saying sorry for everything conceivable, you'll cover any sin you might have forgotten, such as coveting thy neighbour's ox.

"For the sin of envy; for the sin of stiff-necked behaviour; tale bearing; causeless hatred; breach of trust; despising of parents and teachers; foolish speech; denying and lying; bribery; scoffing; wanton glances; haughty eyes; obdurate brow; hardening of the heart ...

"For sins committed while eating and drinking; in business; for the sin of vanity; violence; profanity; evil inclination; perversion ... for the sin that deserves forty stripes ..."

Religious mythology has it that on Yom Kippur, or the Day of Atonement, God assesses the depths of each person's repentance and decides whether they should be pardoned for their wrong-doings or suffer the consequences of their actions.

Anyway, I started thinking about the notion of guilt and whether feeling guilty does have any useful application in our lives. Does guilt provide us with a sense of conscience and hence contribute to our evolution as human beings, or is it simply a corrosive hindrance to growth that keeps us feeling like naughty children locked in a self-absorbed state of shame and self-loathing?

The first thing I did was scour the internet for expert opinions on guilt but instead came across an intriguing site called SherryArt where people expiate their shame by admitting to it. The things people wrote about certainly answered my ponderings on the significance of guilt.

A woman named Kathy Buhler wrote: "Dear Sherry, guilt is a wasted emotion. That's what my parents have always told me anyway. But they're awfully good at teaching me to waste emotions then!"

"I feel guilty for not wanting to move back to my home town, for playing when I should be working, for working too hard when I should be socialising, for turning my cat into some sort of psycho-wimp (I'm sure I had something to do with it), for not cleaning my house, and for not getting my thesis finished months ago. Thanks for allowing me to vent."

Candice, to whom Sherry awards the Most Guilty award, writes: "Guilt? Guilt is my middle name. I feel guilty for not being more than I am, for letting opportunities pass me by, for not having enough energy to do everything ... for spending so much time on the web! ...

"I feel guilty about producing boys who aren't great at sports, who are thin and wiry and freckled and spectacled. But, they are feminists, hurrah. I feel guilty about aluminium cans and eating meat and using cleaning chemicals and having three children and driving a car -- ecoguilt. But not guilty enough to change my bad habits.

"I feel guilty for liking myself even though I'm convinced I've failed completely at being perfect. And now I feel guilty about writing so much!"

G.S writes: "I feel guilty because I wasted the last two months of school secretly following around a guy I have a huge crush on. And because I've been on the net all day when our house is a mess and family is coming from Denver in a few hours. I just heard the door bell. I didn't do the dishes, I haven't vacuumed ..."'

One fellow writes: "I'm guilty of not taking care of my vehicle registration. I also should exercise more and quit smoking ..." while Anonymous writes: "I'm guilty of conspiracy to wilfully ditch work tonight, just to stay home with my girlfriend to watch Katharine Hepburn movies."

This quote really summed it up for me: "I just feel guilty about almost everything, not doing good enough on the test, not spending enough time with my kid, basically not being wonder woman."

Having read through the scores of guilty emails posted, I came to the conclusion that most of us beat up on ourselves not for the huge and wondrous sins that would make the Devil proud -- the sorts of sins that lead to real repentance, self-reflection, pain and ultimately growth. But rather for the most trivial, inane things.

In other words, most of us simply indulge in wanton self-loathing which strips us of our energy, joy, sense of perspective and spiritual growth.

Which leads me to conclude that guilt probably is "a wasted emotion" unless we can harness it as a fuel to help us change or take responsibility for unhelpful or aberrant behaviour. Otherwise, it seems we'd be most productive -- to ourselves and those around us -- to simply forgive ourselves the small things, and move on.

The old prayer puts it very succinctly: "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can and the wisdom to know the difference." Amen to that.

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