

# “INDEED, WE (AND OUR ANCESTORS) HAVE SINNED”: ARE WE ACCOUNTABLE FOR THE SINS OF OUR ANCESTORS?

Rabbi Aryeh Bernstein, Yom Kippur 5782

You can find a short essay version of this theme and these texts at [this link](#).

## I. Confessing Our Sins on Yom Kippur: A Contradiction in the Rambam's Ruling

Every prayer service on Yom Kippur includes an extensive section of confession of sins (vidui), including the “Ashamnu, Bagadnu...”, the long “Al Het” recitation, and other statements. Let's take a look at the legal requirement for this practice of confession in the Rambam's code.

Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Laws of Repentance 2:8  
Rabbi Moshe Maimonides, 1135-1204, Spain & Egypt

The confession which has become the custom of all Israel is, “Indeed, we have (all of us) sinned”, which is the essence of confession.

הוֹדִי שְׁנֵהֲגוּ בּוֹ כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל “אָבֵל אֲנַחְנוּ חָטְאנוּ  
(כְּלָנוּ)” וְהוּא עֵקֶר הַוִּדּוּי.

However, the same Rambam slips something else into his actual script for the prayer book.

Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Order of Prayer, Chapter 4  
Rabbi Moshe Maimonides, 1135-1204, Spain & Egypt

### The Text of Confession

Our God and God of our ancestors: Let our prayer come before You and do not ignore our supplications, for we are not so brazen and stiffnecked that we would say before You, We are righteous and have not sinned; **indeed, we and our ancestors have been guilty, have acted treacherously, have robbed, have spoken slander...**

### נוסח הוִידּוּי

אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְאֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵינוּ תְּבוֹא לְפָנֶיךָ תְּפִלָּתֵנוּ  
וְאַל תִּתְעַלֵּם מִתַּחֲנִיתֵנוּ שְׂאִין אָנוּ עֲזִי פָנִים וְקוֹשִׁי  
עֶרְף שְׁנֵאֲמַר לְפָנֶיךָ צְדִיקִים אֲנַחְנוּ וְלֹא חָטְאנוּ  
אָבֵל אֲנַחְנוּ וְאֲבוֹתֵינוּ אֲשַׁמְנוּ בְּגִדְנוּ גִזְלָנוּ  
דְּבַרנוּ דְּפִי...  
...דְּבַרנוּ דְּפִי...

1. Notice two main differences between the Rambam's two passages:
  - Instead of the simple “we have sinned”, now there is an alphabetic acrostic, through the whole alphabet of synonyms for “sin”: We've sinned from A to Z.
  - More significantly, why has the Rambam added “our ancestors” to the confession? Why might we have to confess their sins?
2. Let's go back to the drawing board. What is the origin of the mitzvah to confess sins?

## II. Confession: The Mitzvah to Declare One's Sins Verbally

VaYikra/Leviticus, Chapter 5

(laws governing individual atonement for sins)

1 Anyone who sins:...[The Torah lists several emblematic sins here --AB]...5 when they experience guilt for any of these matters, **they shall confess that about which they have**

א. וּנְפֹשׁ כִּי תִחָטָא...ה. וְהָיָה כִּי יֵאָשֵׁם לְאַחַת  
מֵאֵלֶּה וְהִתְוֹדָה אֲשֶׁר חָטָא עָלֶיהָ: ו.

**sinned. 6** And they shall bring their guilt offering to YHWH, for their sin which they have sinned, a female from the flock, sheep or goat, as a sin offering; and the priest shall atone on their behalf for their sin.

וְהֵבִיא אֶת אֲשָׁמוֹ לַיהוָה עַל חַטָּאתוֹ אֲשֶׁר חָטָא  
נִקְבָּה מִן הַצֹּאן כֶּשֶׁבֶה אוֹ שְׁעִירַת עֲזִים לְחַטָּאת  
וְכָפַר עָלָיו הַכֹּהֵן מִחַטָּאתוֹ:

1. In this law, who must confess whose sins when?

### VaYikra/Leviticus, Chapter 16

*(The laws governing the Yom Kippur rite.)*

**21** And Aharon shall lay both his hands upon the head of the live goat and confess over it all the iniquities of the Israelites and their transgressions, whatever their sins, and shall put them on the head of the goat; and it shall be sent off to the wilderness by the hand of a designated man.

כֹּא. וְסָמַךְ אֶהָרֵן אֶת־שְׁתֵּי יָדָיו עַל רֹאשׁ הַשְּׁעִיר  
הַחַי וְהִתְוֹדָה עָלָיו אֶת־כָּל־עֲוֹנוֹת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאֶת  
כָּל פְּשָׁעֵיהֶם לְכָל חַטָּאתָם וְנָתַן אֹתָם עַל רֹאשׁ  
הַשְּׁעִיר וְשָׁלַח בְּיַד אִישׁ עֵתִי הַמְדַבֵּרָה:.

1. In this law, who must confess whose sins when?

*The Torah says to declare our sins, but how? What is the formula for confessing our sins?*

### Talmud Bavli, Yoma 87b

Rav said: "You know the mysteries of the universe..."  
And Sh'muel said: "From the depths of the heart..."  
And Levi said: "And in your Torah it is written, saying..."  
Rabbi Yohanan said: "Master of the Universe..."  
Rabbi Yehuda said: "...For our iniquities are too many to count and our sins are too great to number."  
Rav Hamnuna said: "My God, before I was formed I was unworthy. Now that I have been formed, it is as if I had not been formed. I am dust while alive, how much more so when I am dead. See, I am before You like a vessel filled with shame and disgrace. May it be Your will that I may sin no more, and as for the sins I have committed before You, erase them in Your compassion, but not by suffering."

*This was Rava's confession all year long and Rav Hamnuna Zuta's on Yom Kippur.*

Mar Zutra said: We said [all of this] only if one did not say the words: "Indeed, we have sinned." However, one who said, "Indeed, we have sinned," needs nothing further, as Bar Hamdudei said: I was standing before Sh'muel and he was sitting; and when the prayer leader reached the words, "Indeed, we have sinned," Sh'muel stood. [Bar Hamdudei] said: Learn from here that this is the essence of confession.

אמר אמר רב: "אתה יודע רזי עולם..."  
ושמואל אמר "ממעמקי הלב..."  
ולוי אמר "ובתורתך כתוב לאמר..."  
ר' יוחנן אמר "רבון העולמים..."  
ר' יהודה אמר: "...כי עונותינו רבו מלמנות  
וחטאתינו עצמו מספר".  
רב המנונא אמר: "אלהי עד שלא נוצרתי איני  
כדאי עכשיו שנוצרתי כאילו לא נוצרתי עפר  
אני בחיי ק"ו במיתתי. הרי אני לפניך ככלי מלא  
בושה וכלימה. יהי רצון מלפניך שלא אחטא  
ומה שחטאתי מרוק ברחמיך אבל לא ע"י  
יסורי".

*והיינו וידויא דרבא כולה שתא ודרב המנונא  
זוטא ביומא דכפורי.*

אמר מר זוטרא: לא אמרן אלא דלא אמר "אבל  
אנחנו חטאנו" אבל אמר "אבל אנחנו חטאנו"  
תו לא צריך, דאמר בר המדודי:  
הוה קאימנא קמיה דשמואל והוה יתיב וכי  
מטא שליחא דצבורא ואמר "אבל אנחנו  
חטאנו" קם מיקם. אמר שמע מינה עיקר וידוי  
האי הוא.

1. All of these statements remain in the full confession liturgy, but, as we saw, Rambam ruled according to Mar Zutra's teaching. Any signs of ancestors here?

### III. Literary Allusions: What Animates Our Declaration that “Indeed, we have sinned”?

Why not just “We have sinned/אנו חטאנו”? What do we add with the emphatic word “Indeed/אבל”, a rare word that appears only 11 times in the whole Tanakh and only twice in the Torah? Let us look at the only Biblical text with this word in a context of admission of guilt.

#### Bereishit/Genesis, Chapter 42

(Yoseph, still unrecognized, lays out terms for his brothers to receive drought aid from Egypt.)

**18** On the third day Yoseph said to them: “Do this and you shall live, for I am a God-fearer. **19** If you are honest, let one of you brothers be held in your place of detention, while the rest of you go and take home rations for your starving households; **20** but you must bring me your youngest brother, that your words may be verified and that you may not die.” So they did accordingly. **21** They said to one another: “**Indeed, we are guilty** on account of our brother, because we looked on at his anguish, yet paid no heed as he pleaded with us. That is why this distress has come upon us.” **22** Then Reuven spoke up and said to them: “Did I not tell you, ‘Do no wrong to the boy?’ But you paid no heed! Now comes the reckoning for his blood.” **23** They did not know that Yoseph understood, for there was an interpreter between him and them.

יח וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם יוֹסֵף בְּיוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי זֹאת עָשׂוּ וְחָיוּ אֶת־הָאֱלֹהִים אָנֹכִי יִרְאֵהוּ: יט אִם כְּנִים אַתֶּם אֲחֵיכֶם אֶחָד יֵאָסֵר בְּבַיִת מִשְׁמָרְכֶם וְאַתֶּם לָכוּ הַבְּיָאוּ שֶׁבַר רַעֲבוֹן בְּתֵיכֶם: כ וְאֵת אֲחֵיכֶם הִקְטַן תְּבִיאוּ אֵלַי וַיֵּאמְרוּ דְבַרְיֶכֶם וְלֹא תִמְוֹתוּ וַיַּעֲשׂוּ כֵן: כא וַיֹּאמְרוּ אִישׁ אֶל־אָחִיו אֲבֵל אֲשָׁמִים | אֲנַחְנוּ עַל אָחִינוּ אֲשֶׁר רָאִינוּ צָרַת נַפְשׁוֹ בְּהִתְחַנְּנוּ אֵלֵינוּ וְלֹא שָׁמַעְנוּ עַל־כֵּן בָּאָה אֵלֵינוּ הַצָּרָה הַזֹּאת: כב וַיַּעַן רְאוּבֵן אֶתֶם לֹאמַר הֲלוֹא אָמַרְתִּי אֵלֵיכֶם | לֹאמַר אֶל־תְּחַטְּאוּ בְּיַד וְלֹא שָׁמַעְתֶּם וְגַם דָּמוֹ הִנֵּה נִדְרָשׁ: כג וְהֵם לֹא יָדְעוּ כִּי שָׁמַע יוֹסֵף כִּי הִמְלִיץ בֵּינֵתָם:

1. Discuss verse 21. What do you notice in their admission? Why might Mar Zutra see this as a model for our confession? Come up with your own ideas before reading Rabbi Kaunfer's, below.

**Rabbi Elie Kaunfer**, *Interpreting Jewish Liturgy: The Literary Intertext Method*, Doctoral dissertation, 2014, New York, pp. 191-193.

- 1) The confession uttered by Joseph's brothers is not a general admission of guilt for vague sins; rather it is a direct acknowledgement of the ways in which the brothers saw Joseph's suffering when kidnapping him, but did not listen to him....
- 2) It is also clear that the archetype sin that is being confessed to, based on this intertext, is one between people, not between a person and God. Not only that, the sin was committed years earlier. This scene offers the possibility that confession is not something that is limited to the actions of the here and now, or even the past year only. Actions that have been committed long ago can still be recalled, and wrongdoing admitted.
- 3) This confession is a moment of assuming collective responsibility, with the words of guilt recited by “one to another” (v. 21). Significantly, the admission is in the plural....The admission is a moment of putting aside blaming others and uniting in accepting the consequences for the action. This is significant in considering the plural language of confession in the liturgy as well.

## IV. Expanding Our Practice: Echoes of Ancestors

So, where did the Rambam get the idea of confessing the sins of our ancestors?

### VaYaYikra/Leviticus, Chapter 26

(The Curses)

15 if you reject My laws and spurn My rules, so that you do not observe all My commandments and you break My covenant, 16 I in turn will do this to you: I will wreak misery upon you...18 And if, for all that, you do not obey Me, I will go on to discipline you sevenfold for your sins,...33 And you I will scatter among the nations, and I will unsheath the sword against you. Your land shall become a desolation and your cities a ruin...39 Those of you remaining shall melt away over their iniquity in the land of your enemies, and even over the iniquities of their ancestors with them they shall melt away; **40 and they shall confess their iniquity and the iniquity of their ancestors**, in that they trespassed against Me, and were ever so hostile to Me. 41 When I, in turn, have been hostile to them and have removed them into the land of their enemies, then at last shall their obdurate heart humble itself, and they shall atone for their iniquity. 42 Then will I remember My covenant with Jacob; I will remember also My covenant with Isaac, and also My covenant with Abraham; and I will remember the land.

טו ואם בַּחֲקֵתִי תִמָּאֵסוּ וְאִם אֶת מִשְׁפָּטֵי  
תִּגְעַל נַפְשְׁכֶם לְבַלְתִּי עֲשׂוֹת אֶת כָּל מִצְוֹתַי  
לְהַפְרֹכֶם אֶת־בְּרִיתִי: טז אִף אֲנִי אֶעֱשֶׂה זֹאת  
לָכֶם וְהִפְקַדְתִּי עֲלֵיכֶם בְּהִלָּה...יח וְאִם עַד אֵלֶּה  
לֹא תִשְׁמָעוּ לִי וְיִסְפַּתִּי לְיִסְרָה אֶתְכֶם שִׁבְעַת עַל  
חַטָּאתֵיכֶם: ...לג וְאֶתְכֶם אֲזָרֶה בַּגּוֹיִם וְהִרִיקְתִּי  
אֲחֵרִיכֶם חָרֵב וְהִיְתָה אֶרְצְכֶם שְׂמֵמָה וְעָרֵיכֶם  
יְהִיוּ חָרְבָה: ...לט וְהִנְשֹׂאֲרִים בְּכֶם יִמְקֹוּ בְּעוֹנֵם  
בְּאַרְצַת אֲבִיכֶם וְאִף בְּעוֹנֹת אֲבֹתֶם אֶתֶם יִמְקֹוּ:  
מ וְהִתְוֹדוּ אֶת עוֹנֵם וְאֶת עוֹן אֲבֹתֶם בְּמַעֲלָם  
אֲשֶׁר מָעְלוּ בִי וְאִף אֲשֶׁר־הִלְכוּ עִמִּי בְּקָרִי: מא  
אִף אֲנִי אֵלֶּה עִמָּם בְּקָרִי וְהִבֵּאתִי אֶתֶם בְּאֶרֶץ  
אֲבִיָּהֶם אוּ אֲזִי יִכְנַע לְבָבָם הָעָרֶל וְאֲזִי יִרְצוּ אֶת  
עוֹנֵם: מב וְזָכַרְתִּי אֶת־בְּרִיתִי יַעֲקֹב וְאִף אֶת  
בְּרִיתִי יִצְחָק וְאִף אֶת בְּרִיתִי אַבְרָהָם אֲזָכֹר  
וְהִאֲרָץ אֲזָכֹר:

1. What's different about the sins in this passage than those in Leviticus 5 and 16? What might that difference have to do with ingenerational accountability?

### Psalms 106

6 We have sinned along with our ancestors; we have gone astray, done evil. 7 Our ancestors in Egypt did not perceive Your wonders; they did not remember Your abundant love, but rebelled at the sea, at the Sea of Reeds. 8 Yet [God] saved them, for [God's] name, to make known [God's] might...

ו חָטְאֵנוּ עִם אֲבוֹתֵינוּ הָעוֹיִנוּ הַרְשָׁעֵנוּ. ז  
אֲבוֹתֵינוּ בְּמִצְרַיִם לֹא הִשְׁכִּילוּ נִפְלְאוֹתֶיךָ לֹא  
זָכְרוּ אֶת רַב חַסְדֶּיךָ וַיִּמְרוּ עַל יָם סוּף. ח  
וַיִּוְשָׁעִם לְמַעַן שְׁמוֹ לְהוֹדִיעַ אֶת גְּבוּרָתוֹ....

*If you're nervous because confessing the sins of ancestors destabilizes the idea of personal responsibility, you're not alone. How does the following midrash address that problem?*

### Midrash Sifra, Behuqotai, Chapter 8

(c. 225 CE, Land of Israel)

"Even over the iniquities of their ancestors with them they shall melt away" (verse 39): But hasn't the Omnipresent One promised Israel not to punish parents via their children nor children via their parents? As it is said: "Parents shall not be put to death on account

"וְאִף בְּעוֹנֹת אֲבֹתֶם אֶתֶם יִמְקֹוּ" -- והלא כבר הבטיח המקום לישראל שאינו דן האבות על ידי בנים ולא בנים על ידי אבותם, שנאמר, "לא יומתו אבות על בנים ובנים לא יומתו על אבות"? אם כן למה נאמר "וְאִף בְּעוֹנֹת אֲבֹתֶם..ימקו"? אלא בזמן שהם תופסים (ס)

of children and children shall not be put to death on account of parents” (Devarim/Deuteronomy 24:16). If so, for what purpose was “Even over the iniquities of their ancestors...they shall melt away” said? Rather, it is when they hold onto\* the deeds of their ancestors generation after generation, they are judged on account of them.

\* Some versions read this with passive grammar, “when they are in the grip of the deeds of their ancestors...”

תפוסים) מעשה אבותם, דור אחר דור דוריהם,  
נדונים על ידיהם.

1. What does it mean to hold onto the sins of one’s ancestors? What might it mean, more broadly, to be in the grip of the sins of one’s ancestors?
2. Reflect: are there sins of your personal ancestors you still hold onto? Are there sins you do not hold onto? How are they different? Is there a middle case of sins you’re caught up in, even though you don’t actively hold onto them?
3. Same reflection for collective, political sins in your city, state, country, etc. How might this text shed light on contemporary responsibility for structural racism, genocide and displacement of indigenous people, etc.?

## V. Legal Legacy of this Accountability for Ancestral Sin Still in Our Grip

*We saw above that even though Mar Zutra’s statement in the Talmud, which is the basis for the core formulation of confession, makes no mention of ancestors, the Rambam added ancestors into his liturgical text. Here’s another important medieval work about repentance:*

Sha’arei Teshuvah (Gates of Repentance) 1:40

Rabbeinu Yonah, ~1210-1263, Gerona & Toledo, Spain

**The 14th Principle: Confession**, As is said, “they shall confess that about which they have sinned” (VaYikra 5:5). And one must confess their own iniquities **and the iniquities of their ancestors**, because one is punished on their account as long as one holds onto the deeds of their ancestors in their hand. And so it is written: “and they shall confess their iniquity and the iniquity of their ancestors” (VaYikra 26:40).

העיקר הי"ד הוידוי. שנאמר, "וְהִתְוַדָּה אִשְׁרָה  
חָטָא עָלֶיהָ" (ויקרא ה:ה). ויש עליו להזכיר  
עונותיו ועונות אבותיו כי היה נענש עליהן  
באחזו מעשי אבותיו בידו. וכן כתוב, "וְהִתְוַדָּו  
אֶת עֲוֹנֵם וְאֶת עֲוֹן אֲבוֹתֵם" (ויקרא כ"ו:מ).

*And here is the actual text of the liturgy in use throughout most text traditions across the Jewish people today:*

Introduction to the Confession, Yom Kippur Liturgy (and daily in some traditions)

Right before “Ashamnu, Bagadnu, etc.”

Our God and God of our ancestors: Let our prayer come before You and do not ignore our supplications, for we are not so brazen and stiffnecked that we would say before You, YHWH our God and God of ancestors, ‘We are righteous and have not sinned.’ **Indeed, we and our ancestors have sinned.**

אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְאֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵינוּ. תְּבוֹא לְפָנֶיךָ תְּפִלָּתֵנוּ  
וְאֵל תִּתְעַלֵּם מִתְחַנְתְּנוּ. שְׂאִין אָנוּ עֲזֵי פָנִים  
וְקִשֵׁי עֵרֶף לּוֹמֵר לְפָנֶיךָ יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְאֱלֹהֵי  
אֲבוֹתֵינוּ צְדִיקִים אֲנַחְנוּ וְלֹא חָטָאנוּ. אֲבָל אֲנַחְנוּ  
וְאֲבוֹתֵינוּ חָטָאנוּ:

## VI. Spiritual Effects of Taking Responsibility for the Ongoing Sins of Our Ancestors

*We saw above that even though Mar Zutra's statement in the Talmud, which is the basis for the core formulation of confession, makes no mention of ancestors, the Rambam added ancestors into his liturgical text. Here's another important medieval work about repentance:*

Rav Kalonymus Kalman Epstein, Ma'or VaShemesh, on Parashat Bo

*Polish Hasidic Rebbe, 1751-1823*

When a person wishes to repent fully, they must fix that which they personally warped, and also must fix the sins of their ancestors, which is what is meant by "The child brings merit upon the parent" (TB Sanhedrin 104a).

Therefore we say, "We and our ancestors sinned", in order to fix our ancestors' sins as well.

”כשאדם רוצה לעשות תשובה שלימה צריך לתקן מה שקלקל הוא, וגם לתקן חטא אבותיו, דהיינו ”בְּרָא מִזְכָּה אָבִיא“ (סנהדרין קד.). על כן אנחנו אומרים ”אָנַחְנוּ וְאֲבוֹתֵינוּ חָטְאוּ“, כדי לתקן גם כן חטא האבות.

## VII. But Are They Even Our Ancestors?!

*This whole exercise is grounded in the sins at hand being committed by our ancestors. What if my ancestors came to America in 1905 or 1946 or 1979? Are the generations who imposed slavery, for example, my ancestors? Consider the Rambam's responsum about the ancestry of Jews by choice.*

Rambam, Letter to Obadiah the Proselyte

*(translation from A Maimonides Reader, ed. Isadore Twersky, Behrman House, 1972)*

Thus says Moses, the son of Rabbi Maimon, one of the exiles from Jerusalem, who lived in Spain:

I received the question of the master Obadiah, the wise and learned proselyte, may the Lord reward him for his work, may a perfect recompense be bestowed upon him by the Lord of Israel, under whose wings he has sought cover.

You ask me if you, too, are allowed to say in the blessings and prayers you offer alone or in the congregation: "Our God" and "God of our fathers," "You who have sanctified us through Your commandments," "You who have separated us," "You who have chosen us," "You who have inherited us," "You who have brought us out of the land of Egypt," "You who have worked miracles to our fathers," and more of this kind.

Yes, you may say all this in the prescribed order and not change it in the least. In the same way as every Jew by birth says his blessing and prayer, you, too, shall bless and pray alike, whether you are alone or pray in the congregation. The reason for this is, that Abraham our Father taught the people, opened their minds, and revealed to them the true faith and the unity of God; he rejected the idols and abolished their adoration; he brought many children under the wings of the Divine

אמר משה ברבי מימון משני גלות ירושלים אשר בספרד. הגיעו אלינו שאלות מרנא ורבנא עובדיה המשכיל המבין גר הצדק ישלם ה' פעלו ותהי משכרתו שלמה מעם ה' אלקי ישראל אשר בא לחסות תחת כנפיו. (א) שאלה ראשונה - על עסקי הברכות והתפלות, בִּינְךָ לְבֵין עַצְמְךָ אוּ אִם תִּתְפַּלֵּל בְּצַבּוּר, הֵיִשׁ לְךָ\* לומר 'אלהינו ואלהי אבותינו', וְאֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו, וְאֲשֶׁר הִבְדִּילָנוּ, וְאֲשֶׁר בָּחַר בָּנוּ, וְיִשְׁהַנְחֵלֵת אֶת אֲבוֹתֵינוּ, וְיִשְׁהוֹצֵאֵתָנוּ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם, וְיִשְׁעֲשֶׂה נֹסִים לְאֲבוֹתֵינוּ, וְכָל כִּיּוֹצֵא בְּעַנְיֵינוּ אֱלֹהִים.

תשובה - יש לך לומר הכל כְּתִקְנֶנּוּ, וְאֵל תִּשְׁנֶה דָבָר, אֲלֵא כְּמוֹ שֶׁיִּתְפַּלֵּל וְיִבְרַךְ כָּל אֲזָרַח מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל כִּי רָאוּי לְךָ לְבָרַךְ וְלִהְתְּפַלֵּל, בֵּין שֶׁהִתְפַּלֵּלֵת יְחִידִי בֵּין שֶׁהִיֵּת שְׁלִיחַ צַבּוּר. וְעַקֵּר הַדָּבָר, שֶׁאֲבָרְהֶם אֲבִינוּ הוּא שֶׁלֵּמַד כָּל הָעָם\* וְהִשְׁפִּילָם, וְהוֹדִיעָם דָּרָךְ הָאֱמֶת וְיִחַדּוּ שֶׁל הַקַּב"ה, וּבִעֵט בְּעַבּוּדָה זָרָה וְהִפָּר עַבּוּדָתָהּ, וְהִכְנִיס רַבִּים תַּחַת כְּנָפֵי הַשְּׁכִינָה וְלִמְדָם וְהוֹרָם, וְצִוָּה בָּנָיו וּבְנֵי בֵיתוֹ לְשָׁמֵר דְּרָךְ ה', כְּמוֹ שֶׁכָּתוּב בַּתּוֹרָה: "כִּי

Presence; he gave them counsel and advice, and ordered his sons and the members of his household after him to keep the ways of the Lord forever, as it is written, “For I have known him to the end that he may command his children and his household after him, that they may keep the way of the Lord, to do righteousness and justice” (Gen. 18:19). Ever since then whoever adopts Judaism and confesses the unity of the Divine Name, as it is prescribed in the Torah, is counted among the disciples of Abraham our Father, peace be with him. These men are Abraham’s household, and he it is who converted them to righteousness. In the same way as he converted his contemporaries through his words and teaching, he converts future generations through the testament he left to his children and household after him. Thus Abraham our Father, peace be with him, is the father of his pious posterity who keep his ways, and the father of his disciples and of all proselytes who adopt Judaism. Therefore you shall pray, “Our God” and “God of our fathers,” because Abraham, peace be with him, is your father. ...

יְדַעְתִּיו לְמַעַן אֲשֶׁר יִצְוֶה אֶת בְּנָיו וְאֶת בֵּיתוֹ  
אֲחֵרָיו וְשָׁמְרוּ דְרָךְ ה'“ וְגו' (בראשית יח, יט).  
לְפִיכָּהּ כָּל מִי שִׁיתְגִּיר עַד סוֹף כָּל הַדּוֹרוֹת, וְכָל  
הַמֵּיחָד שָׁמוֹ שֶׁל הַקֶּב־הַ כְּמוֹ שֶׁכְּתוּב בַּתּוֹרָה  
- תְּלַמִּידוֹ שֶׁל אֲבִרָהָם אָבִינוּ וּבְנֵי בֵיתוֹ הֵן,  
וְכָל הַחֲזִיר לְמוֹטָב. כְּשֶׁם שֶׁהַחֲזִיר אֲנָשִׁי דוֹרוֹ  
בְּפִיו וּבְלִמּוּדוֹ, כֵּן הַחֲזִיר כָּל הַעֲתִידִין לְהִתְגִּיר  
בְּצוּאָתוֹ שֶׁצִּוָּה אֶת בְּנָיו וְאֶת בְּנֵי בֵיתוֹ. נִמְצָא  
אֲבִרָהָם אָבִינוּ אֵב לְזֶרְעוֹ הַכְּשָׁרִים הַהוֹלְכִים  
בְּדַרְכָּיו, וְאֵב לְתַלְמִידוֹ, וְהֵם כָּל גֵּר שִׁיתְגִּיר.  
לְפִיכָּהּ יֵשׁ לָךְ לומר 'אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְאֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵינוּ',  
שֶׁאֲבִרָהָם הוּא אָבִיךָ...

1. According to this ruling (which is embraced universally as Jewish law and practice), how do Jews think about spiritual and political ancestry? If Abraham is our forefather, regardless of genetics, because we entered into his covenant, what about Washington and Jefferson, Founding Fathers who enslaved people, for any of us whose ancestors were not in America in 1776?

## Epilogue

Ta-Nehisi Coates, [“The Case for Reparations”](#), *The Atlantic*, June, 2014

“We invoke the words of Jefferson and Lincoln because they say something about our legacy and our traditions. We do this because we recognize our links to the past—at least when they flatter us. But black history does not flatter American democracy; it chastens it...

“What I’m talking about is more than recompense for past injustices—more than a handout, a payoff, hush money, or a reluctant bribe. What I’m talking about is a national reckoning that would lead to spiritual renewal. Reparations would mean the end of scarfing hot dogs on the Fourth of July while denying the facts of our heritage. Reparations would mean the end of yelling ‘patriotism’ while waving a Confederate flag. Reparations would mean a revolution of the American consciousness, a reconciling of our self-image as the great democratizer with the facts of our history.”

“And so we must imagine a new country. Reparations—by which I mean the full acceptance of our collective biography and its consequences—is the price we must pay to see ourselves squarely.... What is needed is an airing of family secrets, a settling with old ghosts. What is needed is a healing of the American psyche and the banishment of white guilt.”

## Thoughts and Gleanings?