

## Selichot Sermon 2025

### Responsibility

I want to say that I've had some of the most powerful experiences of my life, in this community over the last seven years. Together we have walked alongside mourners to the grave and gathered around them in their homes. Feeling the gentle warmth of a new-born who receives their name here in this space. Standing alongside a couple marrying under the chuppah. Here on October 7 years ago, at Simchat Torah; circling with the Torah, a silent *hakkafah*. Every one of those moments grows in power because they are collective. Every time every time you say kaddish, or you recite *bar'chu* or even sing the *keddushah*, it's necessary to be part of that collective. A *minyan* a minimum of ten.

This evening, Selichot, demands a different sort of collective presence, at the moment that the community will recite the prayers of confession: the Selichot. When we say *Ashamnu* we have sinned. *Bagadnu*, we have been traitors, *Gazalnu* we have stolen, *Dibarnu dofi*, we have spoken words for harm.

Jewish confession is so far from the experience of being Christian. For us, there is no lonely visit to the confession box. The only time a Jew recites this confession alone, is at the moment of our death. For the living, confession is a collective act. We're all a tiny bit responsible. Speaking together also means that the one who has done something for real, a serious crime, can also come here and say those words aloud - we will not expose them. It is possible to face the truth without the silencing of shame. Because it is in saying these words and acknowledging the truth that change can begin.

But what happens when a person is *not* responsible, should they still confess when they have not done wrong?

In February 2024, I travelled to a kibbutz on the Gaza border, seeing the utter destruction: the buildings burned and destroyed, the place where the fences have been breached. Empty homes with the names of the dead and the kidnapped in front of them. Of men, women, of children, of old people and even carers and farm workers, who had come to work in Israel in the kibbutz. There were no words. Just to be there, only to listen. But I also remember at one moment in those days point in those days someone saying,

"Thank you for coming here. But what took you so long?"

I felt those words sink deep inside me like a stone, and they sit there still. *What took you so long?*

During the months of Elul, this year, I find myself thinking about this. *What took you so long?* Checking my calendar, I see I arrived there some 16 weeks after

October 7. For people who went throughout, living in the nightmare, 16 weeks is a lifetime.

I realise that that phrase “what took you so long” means “where were you? I need you. I need you to be present.”

And so here we are. Two years later. Most of us still not experts in making sense of it. Some have gone down the rabbit warren online of news and politics. Others just close their eyes. Most of us are between the two, opening one’s eyes, looking at the news, and closing them again. Trying to make sense of who is responsible.

What I want to say today on Selichot is this. Nearly two years later: sometimes we are **not** actually guilty. We, the Jewish people who are experts in collective responsibility.

As you also know, there is a certain strand of antisemitism that holds every Jew responsible for what is happening in Israel and of course in Gaza.

How does then one distinguish between the external guilt that other people wish to impose upon you, and the collective responsibility, the truth, when it is right saying those words, *ashamnu*, *bagadnu* ? That is a difficult question. The soul searching at the heart of the Jewish world today, and for the coming future will begin with some difficult questions. In which ways must the people of the diaspora act, to preserve the relationship that is the vital bond, the enduring connection, between Israel and the world wide Jewish people? In which ways will the people of the diaspora act to preserve the integrity of our bonds, here in our *own* country. To prevent the breaking part, the fracturing into separate factions, groups, each with their own political agenda.

Or on the other hand, is that solution the only correct step to take?

Remember, the state of Israel was actually brought into life because the different Jewish factions, Zionists and even religious leaders who were anti-Zionist, confronted those differences, and wrestled out of them a workable compromise; that is the origin of the institutions that were the foundation of Israel as a Modern state, and that is the story behind the Declaration of Independence. The struggle of difference. Politics, values, beliefs. Those differences were Israel’s strength.

The world does not like to struggle with difference today.

But **remember** how in the longest course of Jewish history they have been the making of us.

I am part of this people, this long-lived people, you, every one of you, part of this people. Every person here is necessary. Each one has a responsibility to be present and to build with hope, a workable future.

To bring that energy of different truth, honourable disagreement, to the greater task of our moment in history.

We are not responsible for the disaster that is all around us, the escalation of war, the cancellation of ceasefires, the death and the suffering. But I believe that each one must take up the responsibility to think toward a future, and to build a pathway toward the possible. I believe that in the hyper emotional world that many people live online, there is a responsibility to distinguish between emotion and thinking. To become present to *different ways* of thinking. To find that truth. And certainly, never to condemn oneself to a life in which you speak only to the people one already agrees with.

I don't have any answers. But I will say this: our confession is more powerful when one understands its limits. Tonight, we will recite prayers on behalf of each other, and the whole Jewish people; to say words as collective only to stand in solidarity with those who are in fact responsible. Those prayers, Selichot, are only a starting point. Their uncomfortable question is not the question posed to me in the devastation of October 7, "where **were** you", but *where **are** you?*

Where and how is the power of action and thought in your own life, the capacity to step out of the comfort of certainty, so that you, I, we all of us, here with the blessing of life in the diaspora, in the collective presence of every Jew in this world, use the moment to build something out of the destruction. From the seed of hope for which every person is in fact responsible. Knowing that the way forward is toward and through difficulty, and pain. Through the experience of immeasurable loss. And in the stubborn pursuit of a future that cannot be seen but will surely come.

We take a breath and turn to the communal confessions and we begin.

©Shulamit Ambalu