

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"l

Covenant & Conversation

*A thought for Yom Kippur
from the Koren Sacks mahzor*

The day is intense. The process of preparation and prayer began forty days ago on Rosh Chodesh Ellul with the blowing of shofar and the saying of Psalm 27 [L'David Hashem Ori]. It gathered pace with the saying of Selichot. It became a courtroom drama on Rosh Hashanah with the shofar proclaiming that the heavenly court is in session and we are on trial for our lives. The case for the defence has been made. We have neither denied nor made excuses for our sins. We have confessed our guilt, individual and collective, and we have appealed for mercy and forgiveness. The trial is now in its final hours. The court is about to rise. The verdict, signed, will soon be sealed.

What has given Yom Kippur its unique place on the map of the Jewish heart is that it is the most intensely personal of all the festivals.

Pesach, Shavuot and Sukkot are celebrations of Jewish memory and history. They remind us of what it means to be a member of the Jewish people, sharing its past, its present and its hopes.

Rosh Hashanah, the anniversary of creation, is about what it means to be human under the sovereignty of God.

But Yom Kippur is about what it means to be me, this unique person that I am. It makes us ask, What have I done with my life? Whom have I hurt or harmed? How have I behaved? What have I done with God's greatest gift, life itself? What have I lived for and what will I be remembered for?

To be sure, we ask these questions in the company of others. Ours is a communal faith. We pray together, confess together and throw ourselves on God's mercy together. But Yom Kippur remains an intensely personal day of conscience and self-reckoning.

It is the day on which, as the Torah says five times, we are commanded to "afflict" ourselves. Hence:

**This issue of Toras Aish is dedicated
in loving memory of my dear parents
Chayim Yitchok ben Yehudo Hakauhen
Paul Kahn
and Mirjam bas Hachover R'Yehaushua
Irma Kahn-Goldschmidt
by Fernand Kahn**

no eating or drinking, no bathing, no anointing, no sexual relations, no leather shoes.

If we are men we wear a kittel, a white garment reminiscent, some say, of the white tunic the High Priest wore when he entered the Holy of Holies. Others say it is like a burial shroud. Either way, it reminds us of the truths we must face alone. The Torah says that "No one else shall be in the Tent of Meeting from the time that [Aaron] enters the sanctuary to make atonement until he leaves" (Lev 16:17).

Like the High Priest on this holy day, we face God alone. We confront our mortality alone. Outwardly we are in the company of others, but inwardly we are giving a reckoning for our individual life, singular and unique. The fact that everyone else around us is doing likewise makes it bearable.

Fasting and repenting, I stand between two selves, as the High Priest once stood facing two goats, symbolic of the duality of human nature. There is the self I see in the mirror and know in my darkest hours. I know how short life is and how little I have achieved. I remember, with a shame undiminished by the passing of time, the people I offended, wounded, disappointed; the promises I made but did not fulfill; the harsh words I said and the healing words I left unsaid. I know how insignificant I am in the scheme of things, one among billions who will live, die and eventually vanish from living memory. I am next-to-nothing, a fleeting breath, a driven leaf: "dust you are and to dust you will return."

Yet there is a second self, the one I see in the reflection of God's love. It is not always easy to feel God's love but it is there, holding us gently, telling us that every wrong we repent of is forgiven, every act of kindness we perform is unforgotten, that we are here because God wants us to be and because there is work He needs us to do. He loves us as a parent loves a child and has a faith in us that never wavers however many times we fail. In Isaiah's words, "Though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed, yet My unfailing love for you will not be shaken nor My covenant of peace be removed" (Isaiah 54:10).

God, who "counts the number of the stars and calls each of them by name" (Psalm 147:4), knows each of us by name, and by that knowledge confers on us inalienable dignity and unconditional love. Teshuvah means "coming home" to this second self and to the better angels of our nature.

At no other time, barring exceptional

circumstance, will we be as close to God as on Yom Kippur. We fast, we pray and we muster the courage to face the worst about ourselves. We are empowered to do so by our unshakeable belief that God loves, forgives, and has more faith in us than we do in ourselves. We can be better than we are, better than we were. And though we may have stumbled and fallen, God is holding out his hand to lift us, giving us the strength to recover, endure and grow to become the person He is calling on us to be: a blessing to others, a vehicle through which His light flows into the world, an agent of hope, His partner in the work of redemption.

Faith is the courage to take a risk, as Abraham and Sarah took the risk of following the call to leave their land and birthplace to travel to an unknown destination, as the Israelites did when they began their journey into the desert, an “unsown land.” To be a Jew is to take the risk of believing that the evils of this world are not inevitable or irremediable; that we can mend some of the fractures of humanity; that we, by loving others as God loves us, can bring the Divine presence into our lives, turning a little of the prose of the human condition into poetry and song.

Jews do not accept suffering that can be alleviated or wrong that can be put right as the will of God. We accept only what we cannot change. What we can heal, we must. So, disproportionately, Jews are to be found as teachers fighting ignorance, doctors fighting disease, economists fighting poverty and lawyers fighting injustice. Judaism has given rise, not in one generation but in more than a hundred, to an unrivalled succession of prophets, priests, philosophers, poets, masters of halakha and aggadah, commentators, codifiers, rationalists, mystics, sages and saints, people who gave the Divine presence its local habitation and name and taught us to make gentle the life of this world. Judaism has consistently asked great things of our people, and in so doing, helped make them great. On Yom Kippur, God is calling us to greatness.

That greatness is not conventional. We do not need to be rich or successful or famous or powerful to find favour in the eyes of God and our fellows. All we need is *chein*, graciousness, *chesed*, kindness, *rachamim*, compassion, *tzedek*, righteousness and integrity, and *mishpat*, what Albert Einstein called the “almost fanatical love of justice” that made him think his stars he was a Jew.

To be a Jew is to seek to heal some of the wounds of the world, to search out the lonely and distressed and bring them comfort, to love and forgive as God loves and forgives, to study God’s Torah until it is engraved in our minds, to keep God’s commands so that they etch our lives with the charisma of holiness, to bring God’s presence into the shared spaces of our common life, and to continue the story of our ancestors, writing our chapter in the book of Jewish life.

“Wherever you find God’s greatness,” said

Rabbi Yohanan, “there you will find His humility.” And wherever you find true humility, there you will find greatness. That is what Yom Kippur is about: finding the courage to let go of the need for self-esteem that fuels our passion for self-justification, our blustering claim that we are in the right when in truth we know we are often in the wrong. Most national literatures, ancient and modern, record a people’s triumphs. Jewish literature records our failures, moral and spiritual. No people has been so laceratingly honest in charting its shortcomings. In Tanakh there is no one without sin. Believing as we do that even the greatest are merely human, we also know that even the merely human – us – can also be great. And greatness begins in the humility of recognising our failings and faults.

The greatness to which God is calling us, here, now is “not in heaven nor across the sea” but in our hearts, minds and lives, in our homes and families, our work and its interactions, the tenor and texture of our relationships, the way we act and speak and listen and spend our time. The question God asks us on this day is not, “Are you perfect?” but “Can you grow?”

There are three barriers to growth. One is self-righteousness, the belief that we are already great. A second is false humility, the belief that we can never be great. The third is learned helplessness, the belief that we can’t change the world because we can’t change ourselves. All three are false. We are not yet great but we are summoned to greatness, and we can change. We can live lives of moral beauty and spiritual depth. We can open our eyes to the presence of God around us, incline our inner ear to the voice of God within us. We can bring blessings into other people’s lives.

And now, in absolute humility, we turn to God, pleading with Him to seal us in the book of life so that we can fulfil the task He has set us, to be His ambassadors to humankind.

I wish you all a g’mar chatimah tovah and blessings for the year ahead. *Covenant and Conversation is kindly sponsored by the Schimmel Family in loving memory of Harry (Chaim) Schimmel zt”l © 2024 The Rabbi Sacks Legacy Trust rabbisacks.org*

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

“For this reason I hastened to flee to Tarshish, for I know that You are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger, with much kindness, and relenting of evil” [Jonah 4:2]. One of the highlights of the Yom Kippur experience is the reading of Jonah, a book containing profound lessons for the holiest day of the year. God calls upon Jonah, son of Amitai, to implore the people of the city of Ninveh to repent. Jonah refuses to do so, and believes he can escape God by sailing out to sea. The central issue of the book is why the prophet should have found that mission so objectionable.

We must remember that Ninveh was the capital

city of Assyria and Assyria, then the arch enemy of Israel. Indeed, Assyria defeated the ten tribes and banished them into exile in the 8th century B.C.E. Jonah cannot understand why God is interested in Assyria's repentance. After all, as long as the Jews have more merits than the Assyrians, the chances of an Israeli victory in battle are far greater. Hence Jonah seeks to escape God by boarding a ship bound for Tarshish.

A raging storm develops at sea, and a drawing of lots makes it clear that Jonah is responsible for the storm [1:4-7]. It is fascinating to note that water is both the major symbol of the Book of Jonah as well as the major symbol of the Tishrei period of festivals.

Water is both the symbol of life as well as of destruction. The Bible opens "and the spirit of God hovered over the face of the waters" [Gen. 1:2], and no life can grow without the presence of water. At the same time, the Bible tells us immediately prior to its description of the life giving waters that "there was darkness on the face of the tehom", usually translated as the depth of the cavernous waters of the netherworld. It was, after all, the waters of the flood that threatened to destroy the world.

At the same time, the Mishna tells us that the Festival of Sukkot is when God judges our merit for the life giving rain which enables fruit and vegetation to provide sustenance for the coming year [Rosh Hashana 1:2]. Rain is therefore a symbol of God's gracious bounty, His purification of His children on the Day of Forgiveness.

As the prophet Ezekiel says in words that we repeat during the Yom Kippur penitential prayers, "And I shall sprinkle upon you the waters of purification and you shall become pure" [36:25]. Hence the festival of Shemini Atzeret, in which we thank God for rain, has a double meaning: God's waters bring physical sustenance as well as spiritual purity, the combination of the two brings redemption.

It goes even one step deeper. We begin giving God praise as the One Who "causes the winds to blow and the rains to flow" on Shemini Atzeret, and these words of praise are incorporated in the Amidah blessing about God, "Who causes the dead to live again." God's purifying waters can even revive us from death and bring us eternal life.

Jonah is cast overboard into the raging waters. He has challenged God, endeavoring to escape the Divine mission, and is therefore worthy of death. God, however, in His infinite compassion, provides a whale, a creature of the water, to follow Jonah and bring him back to life. In Jonah's own words, "I called, in my distress, to God and He answered me. From the belly of the grave I cried out. You heard my voice. You cast me into the depth of the heart of the sea... your waves passed over me... yet You lifted my life from the pit O Lord my God." (2:3-7).

The waters almost destroyed Jonah, and the waters in the form of a water-creature sent by God saved

his life. God is trying to teach the crucial lesson that Assyria, which has been so evil and destructive, can and must make a complete turnaround if the world is to be redeemed. And God is also teaching that He is willing to overlook the evil Assyria has committed if she will indeed repent.

Jonah refuses to accept this. He is, after all, the son of Amitai, a name derived from *emet*, truth. Truth demands that evil never be overlooked; evil must be punished.

This is precisely how Jonah explains why he refused God's mission: "...for this reason I hastened to flee to Tarshish, for I know that You are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger, with much kindness, and relenting of evil" [Jonah 4:2]. This is not the God in whom I want to believe, the God who described Himself as being "abundant in lovingkindness and truth" (Ex. 34:6).

But Jonah has forgotten that his first name means dove, and that just as the dove was saved from the flood so was he undeservedly saved from the raging waters. The Compassionate One thus teaches the vital lesson that anyone who truly repents (returns) from his sins can benefit from God's life-giving purity. May we all merit to earn that gift this Yom Kippur. ©2017 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

The sublime holiness of the day of Yom Kippur is ushered in by the declaration of the annulment of vows in the Kol Nidrei service. Obviously, we do not want to appear before the Heavenly court with outstanding unfulfilled commitments. But attempting to discharge one's committed, seriously undertaken commitments by cancelling those obligations unilaterally seems, at first glance, to be a slippery way of escaping one's responsibilities.

Why are we so confident that Heaven will agree to this and truly wipe that slate clean for us? The Torah itself appears to be quite strict and exacting in matters of vows and commitments. "All that you verbally commit to shall you fulfill" is apparently the governing principle of the Torah in these matters. Yet we are sure that Heaven will accept our nullification of vows as being valid, both legally and morally.

I believe that the reason for this becoming acceptable and even somewhat noble lies in the majestic concept of Yom Kippur itself. Forgiveness is a Heavenly trait. Human beings may forgive slights and insults and not act vengefully but within themselves the hurt and the grudge remains. Such is our human nature, the instinct of self-preservation that is part of us from our first breath to our last.

But on Yom Kippur we ask Heaven to truly forgive us and to reverse time, so to speak, so that our sins and hurtful behavior appear never to have really occurred. Heaven does not bear grudges. And the day

of Yom Kippur is a touch of Heaven here on earth.

What a gift this holy day is to us! The reversal of time makes us all clean and fresh again. The body may feel its years and infirmities, but the soul is refreshed and revitalized. Before holidays and special occasions we polish the silver items that we possess so that they gleam with their original luster, Yom Kippur polishes our souls, removing the tarnish that dimmed it over the year.

Since the body is not serviced on Yom Kippur, the soul, for this one day of the year, takes precedence and Heaven restores the soul to its original state of being and with its connection to its Creator. The soul needs no physical nourishment or exterior garments of show. It longs for the tranquility of the day and for the dialogue it conducts with its Creator through the soaring prayers of Yom Kippur.

And because of the magical reversal of time that Yom Kippur endows us with, we are able to relive the experience of the service of the High Priest in the Temple service of Yom Kippur. The past, present and future all merge seamlessly on Yom Kippur because our souls are eternal without barriers of time to distract us. So our inner selves are able to experience what to our physical selves is an unseen and remote occurrence. This ethereal quality of Yom Kippur should be treasured and appreciated by us on this, the holiest day of the year.

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RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

Migdal Ohr

"Pave, pave, clear a path. Remove all obstacles from the way of My nation." (Yeshayahu 57:14)

The heralded words of the Haftara on Yom Kippur begin with the direction of Hashem that the path to Teshuva, and to Him, should be one that is clear and easy to travel. In order for the Jews to return, Hashem demands that they be given every opportunity and advantage in achieving their goals. As we say in the daily Shemona Esrai three times each weekday, Hashem desires Teshuva.

The commentaries offer differing explanations of who these words were directed at. Rashi says they were spoken to the Jewish People, themselves, that they push away the Yetzer Hara who causes them to stumble. By choosing to ignore his urgings, and resisting his lures (with Hashem's help, of course,) we are able to clear our own way back to Hashem.

The Chida suggests that this may be a call to the leaders of the generation to cleanse themselves first, so they may then guide their followers on the path to repentance. This is indicated by the repetition of the word "solu" meaning pave. First pave their own paths, then do it for the Jewish People.

Others, including the Malbim, say that it is

Hashem, Himself, who will clear a path for sinners to return to Him, and this verse is where He expresses His intention to do so. This promising message should inspire hope in all of us that we can accomplish what we need to on this special day of atonement and favor from Hashem.

It would seem that one thing is agreed upon by everyone. Hashem wants us to come back to Him and He doesn't want it to be difficult. He's letting us know that the path back will be cleared for us, and that this is the road we ought to take.

Sometimes we have the power to recognize the temptations of the world for what they are, misdirection; smoke and mirrors. They promise joy but deliver anything but. What they bring are tribulations and suffering, camouflaged and disguised so that we want them. Hashem tells us, "Push it all aside and come back to Me, the living source of all good and happiness." If we can, great.

Sometimes we don't have the power to do it alone. Hashem sends us guides, teachers, and leaders to show us the way. They inspire us to improve, and now they are tasked with blazing a path for the rest of us to follow. Some of us are those leaders, because we have the ability to shine a light for others, and we need to clean up our acts not only for ourselves, but for the betterment of the world.

But, if no one is able to resist the draw of sin; if people gladly revel in the material and physical pleasures of the world, then Hashem declares, "I will blast a path for you to follow. I will remove the stumbling blocks in your way." One way or another, the road home will be clear. The opportunist will recognize that if he is the one to do it, the reward will be immeasurable, so let's all try to sidestep the Yetzer Hara, and ease on down the road. ©2024 Rabbi J. Gewirtz & Migdal Ohr

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

Yom Kippur is quite properly viewed as a somber day of introspection. The Torah reinforces this perspective when declaring that on the Day of Atonement, we are to "afflict [te'anu] our souls" (Leviticus 16:29). We do so by practicing self-denial (i.e., refraining from eating and drinking, among other prohibitions).

But the biblical term for self-denial – inui – has another meaning. It is similar to the word anita, used to describe what the farmer said when joyously bringing his first fruits to Jerusalem, beginning on the Shavuot holiday (Deuteronomy 26:5). His expression moved beyond words; it was a song, a melody.

Similarly, matzah on Passover is called lechem oni, as it was consumed by Jewish slaves in Egypt. In the Haggadah, however, lechem oni is used to mean "bread over which answers to questions are given" (onin, similar to anita, Pesachim 115b). At our Seders, these answers are interwoven with heartwarming song.

Rounding out the three major festivals, Sukkot is connected to ananei kavod (clouds of glory), representing God's protection of Am Yisrael (Sukkah 11a). Here again, as with Passover and Shavuot, ananei, which sounds like anita, could homiletically refer to our joyfully singing in the sukkah, celebrating God's loving support.

From this perspective, te'anu on Yom Kippur is upbeat, reminding us that Yom Kippur is also a holiday, a day of joy. This position is found in rabbinic and halachic sources:

- "Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel said: There were never such joyous festivals for Israel as the fifteenth of Av and Yom Kippur" (Mishnah, Ta'anit 4:8).

- Shivah (the seven-day mourning period for a close relative) is curtailed by major holidays of joy (i.e., Passover, Sukkot, and Shavuot), including Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

- While fast days are never held on Shabbat, Yom Kippur is an exception. Being a day of great joy, it is aligned with the spirit of Shabbat.

Even understanding inui on Yom Kippur as self-denial can be positive. To be sure, self-denial on Yom Kippur involves abstaining from all life energy – not only from eating and drinking but from washing, anointing ourselves, using cosmetics, wearing leather shoes, and cohabitation. More deeply, however, it has been suggested that these prohibitions are meant to simulate death – yes, inui is nothing less than a brush with death, through which one can better appreciate life.

Similarly, the kittel, the white robe reminiscent of burial shrouds worn on Yom Kippur, can be viewed optimistically. To paraphrase a rabbinic teaching: if one is about to be judged in court, one wears black, unsure of the verdict. As the Book of Life and Death is open, one wraps in white, believing and knowing the outcome will be good (Jerusalem Talmud, Rosh Hashanah 1:3).

Note, as well, that the final meal before Yom Kippur is preceded by the afternoon Minchah service, in which we include the Al Chet confessional prayer. This, the rabbis suggest, ensures that we have received atonement in case we choke to death during the final meal (Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Laws of Repentance 2:7). In contrast, Rabbenu Yonah says that the final meal should be viewed as a festival meal. Since we don't eat on Yom Kippur, we move the meal up to the eve of Yom Kippur (Sha'arei Teshuvah 4:8–10).

In the same vein, the vidui, too, the confession said on Yom Kippur, which lists serious misdeeds, is sung in an upbeat, major key, as we are convinced that we will be given another chance; God will intervene and inscribe us for a good year.

This approach has informed our services on Yom Kippur Day. The tears we shed are interspersed with buoyant song and even dance. After all, it's not always that one is given a second, a third, and – through the years – umpteen chances to reshape one's life and

deeds. Thus, while Yom Kippur is a deeply solemn day, it is also a hopeful, optimistic day of renewal and joy. ©2024 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA. Rabbi Avi Weiss is Founder and Dean of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, the Open Orthodox Rabbinical School, and Senior Rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale

RABBI AHRON LOPIANSKY

TorahWeb

Teshuva has many components to it, as we would well expect. There is the sincere regret for having done the transgression in the first place; there is the effort to never do it again; and then there is the vidui -- confession. From experience, we all probably realize that the easiest one is the confession, true regret is a bit more difficult, while working at making sure that we never do it again is the one that we usually have the greatest difficulty with. Yet, the Rambam (Hilchos Teshuva 1:1) when defining the mitzvah of teshuva defines it as the act of confessing the sin. Indeed, on Yom Kippur what is clearly repeated again and again is the vidui. To us this seems counterintuitive. We could even imagine a scenario where a person truly regrets his sins, stops doing what he shouldn't do, but never got around to reciting the vidui -- confession. We would ask ourselves, "who is the better of the two: the one who confessed but hasn't really succeeded in changing his ways much, or the one who actually changed, but hadn't recited a formal confession?"

To understand this conundrum, we need to go back to the very origins of sin. When the serpent seduced Adam and Chava into sinning, the enticement was not the taste of the fruit. What the serpent told them was, "if you eat from the fruits of this tree, you will be like G-d and understand evil and good." What this means is that Hashem had endowed mankind with extraordinary wisdom. A wisdom that can think far and wide, understand incredible things about the universe he lives in, and create extraordinarily works of depth and understanding. The one thing that the human mind cannot understand in its fullest is the definition of what is truly good and what is truly evil. Great minds have grappled with this issue, which is at the heart of much of philosophical search and thought. Many points have been bandied about, but no two people have ever agreed on the same set of rules. We even struggle to define what actually makes something good and what makes something evil, for good and evil are moral values laid down by Hashem. We can compare, contrast, and expand, but we can never reach the point of being able to independently define good and evil. Being that man was created to be independent, and in a certain sense all-encompassing, this lack of ability frustrates him to his core. It is the one place where man must bow his proud head and say, "You, Almighty One, are the One who knows it and deems it good or bad, and I am simply

a servant who needs to follow your direction faultlessly". This admission in a certain sense is a core irritant of the human being, and that is why he so readily fell into the serpent's enticement of, "you will become like G-d to know good from evil."

When we do teshuva, we must always start at the root of our straying from Hashem. Besides the actual deed we did, besides the particular cravings and desires that we had, at the heart of sinning is a deeper root. It is that we decided that something is just fine to do. In every sin there is the tiny speck of, "I will make the decisions about my life, and about what is right and what is wrong." Therefore, without a confession, it may be that a person may change his actions, but he is not really moving away from sin. Imagine the following: a person has been eating treif, and the doctor tells him that meat is deadly for his heart condition and he must immediately give up all meat if he wishes to be healthy. The person, in his desire to be healthy, might listen flawlessly to the doctor and give up all meat. He has in effect stopped eating treif, but he has not moved away one iota from his sin of eating treif. On the other hand, the person who confesses and owns up that Hashem is the one who dictates right and wrong and that he is merely to follow instructions, has taken the first step in the right direction. He may struggle and not be able to move on, but at least he has taken the first step. This is why the heart of teshuva is the vidui -- confession.

This also lends insight to an extraordinarily central part of the avodah on Yom Kippur. Of all the sacrifices that we bring on Yom Kippur, the placing of the two goats next to each other, and then casting the lot as to which one would be brought on the mizbeach and which would be thrown off Azazel, is perhaps the strangest of all of the rituals. It is strange for many reasons: firstly, it seems as if the Azazel offering is an offering to powers other than Hashem, which is strictly forbidden. We won't focus on that point. But the very ceremony of drawing lots seems to be a very strange ritual. After all, all of the sacrifices brought had to be first dedicated orally before being brought as a sacrifice, and yet no mention is made of this step, for it is an unimportant prerequisite for bringing a sacrifice. Rather it is the actual act of bringing a sacrifice which is what the avoda is about. And yet when it comes to the two goats, it seems that the ceremony of choosing which one would go on the mizbeach and which one would be cast off Azazel seems to be the highlight. How do we get a sense of that?

In effect, what is happening is that we are going back to the very beginnings of sin, and acting out something that will return us to the acknowledgement that good and evil are all Hashem's to decide. For the halacha is that we must take two goats that are as similar as possible. This means we have standing before us two animals that are indistinguishable to the human eye in

every which shape or form. They're similar in height, weight, in price, and in every which way possible. We have no way of deciding which is the ultimate good and which is the ultimate bad. When we cast a lot it is as if we are saying, "Hashem it's Your call". Your hashgacha decides which lot is cast on which animal, and that will designate what is good and bad. The animal that You designate to be brought on the mizbeach is the embodiment of the ultimate good. The animal that You designate to be cast off to the powers of evil, has been designated by you as the embodiment of evil. In effect we are saying to Hashem, "You are the one that is yodea tov vera, and we are clueless".

Yom Kippur is a day of atonement. It is an atonement of the many, many individual sins that have accumulated over the year. We certainly need to examine our actions, regret those that we should not have done, and put into place the mechanisms and disciplines that are necessary to move us forward. We have thus rectified our actions.

But at the deepest level, the attitude and perspective underlying our ease and ability to sin is the thought that, "I know what is right and what is wrong, and no one will tell me differently." On Yom Kippur we come face to face with that poison that the serpent has injected in us, and we say, "Anna Hashem, yes, it is You who sets the standard of good and bad, and I have fallen short of that standard that is Yours to set." Thus begins the process of atonement for the ultimate sin: the sin of the eitz hada'as. © 2024 Rabbi A. Lopiansky & TorahWeb.org

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Jewish Geography

What does "Azazel" refer to? Based on the context of the four times the word appears in Tanach – all of them in Vayikra 16, regarding the שְׂעִיר הַמִּשְׁתַּלַּח (the goat sent away on Yom Kippur) – and the way it's explained by the commentators, it would seem that it either refers to the location where the "scapegoat" was sent or the entity that it was sent to. However, both of these possibilities are problematic.

When Ibn Ezra (Vayikra 16:8) quotes some who say that Azazel is a specific mountain, he includes the opinion that it's a mountain near Mt. Sinai – which means the term couldn't apply once they left Sinai. Although Ibn Ezra isn't concerned about this, most who say it's a place name associate it with a cliff 10-12 mil from Jerusalem – which means it didn't apply before the Temple was built. How could "Azazel" be a specific location if the goat was sent from numerous locations – including from Shiloh for hundreds of years and then from the Temple for hundreds of years? Additionally, if Azazel is a location, when the Torah describes where the goat was actually sent (Vayikra 16:21-22), shouldn't the name of the location be mentioned there too? It therefore seems unlikely that when the Torah uses the term "Azazel" it's referring to a place.

Ramban (16:8) is among those who say that Azazel is an angel (specifically Satan). Others equate Azazel with a “desert demon,” but whatever entity Azazel is associated with, the notion of sending a tribute or offering to anyone or anything other than G-d – on any day of the year – goes against the very essence of monotheism. Despite Ramban trying to minimize this issue by framing it as us following G-d’s instructions (so the “gift” comes from Him, not us), a major part of the Yom Kippur service being something that, at the very least, smacks of idol worship, seems very foreign.

When the Talmud discusses the meaning of the word “Azazel” (Yoma 67b), it seems to endorse both possibilities. First it says that עזאזל means “עז וקשה.” I’ll translate this as “strong and hard,” but words like fierce, cruel, sharp, mighty and severe work too. Either way, it clearly refers to the characteristics of the mountain where the goat is sent to (and thrown off of), implying that Azazel is a location. The Talmud then quotes the School of R’ Yishmael, that Azazel atones for the sins of עזאזל and עזאזל, who (Rashi explains) are angels of destruction that descended and took advantage of the daughters of man, with the sending of the goat somehow atoning for this type of sin. (Others point out that the sins sending the goat away atone for are not limited to adultery.) However we understand this, it certainly seems to align with the opinion that Azazel is the name of an angel. Nevertheless, it doesn’t say that the goat is being sent to this angel, but that the act of sending the goat away (laden with the nation’s sins) atones for actions attributed to this angel.

Yalkut Shimoni (44) is one of the Midrashim that expands on this idea. When G-d created man, some angels didn’t like the idea. When G-d decided to destroy the world (by sending the flood) because mankind had sinned, these angels said “told You so!” (or something to that effect). G-d responded by telling them that if they lived on earth like man does, they’d be worse. They asked G-d if they could prove Him wrong, and when He said okay, they proved Him right instead, with one of the angels (Azazel) still trying to tempt humans to sin. The Midrash ends by saying “and therefore Israel brings offerings on Yom Kippur; one lottery is for G-d in order to atone for Israel and one lottery is for Azazel, so that he can carry the sins of Israel – and this is the Azazel that’s in the Torah.” But what does this mean?

In Berachos (31b-32a), the Talmud says that Eliyahu accused G-d of causing Israel to sin by creating the evil inclination. Although Rashba (in his commentary on this Aggada) says Eliyahu was right, Maharsha refers us to Kiddushin 30b, where G-d tells Israel that the Torah is the antidote for the evil inclination, so even though G-d created us with the natural tendency to sin, He also gave us the ability to overcome this tendency, thereby shifting the blame back to us. Azazel’s downfall proves Eliyahu’s point, as even the heavenly angels will sin when faced with the temptation humans face; mere mortals have no

chance, unless we use the antidote G-d gave us – the Torah – to combat the evil inclination.

When we do fail, whose fault is it – G-d’s for creating the evil inclination, or ours for not studying and following the Torah? Sending the goat bearing our sins “to a land that is cut off” (16:22) is G-d’s way of accepting some of the blame – the part that led to Azazel’s downfall – and removing that blame from us, i.e. granting atonement for our sins. But we still have to repent for our part of the sin, since we could have chosen otherwise. Azazel “carrying our sins” refers to the part that can be blamed on the evil inclination, as this aspect of sin is removed from us and attributed to the factors that caused Azazel’s downfall instead.

Rather than “Azazel” referring to the location the goat is sent to, or an entity to which it is sent, it refers to the ritual itself, whereby the part of sin that caused Azazel’s downfall is transferred from us to him (since he actively tries to cause us to sin; bear in mind that Satan is also the embodiment of the evil inclination – see Bava Basra 16a). The lottery designates which goat will be used for the offering to G-d, and which goat will be used for the Azazel ritual (16:8). The goat designated for the Azazel ritual is not slaughtered, but stands before G-d to bring atonement (lit. “upon him,” but it could be translated as “upon Him”), to be sent to the desert as part of the Azazel ritual (16:10). When describing the ritual impurity caused by some of the Yom Kippur rituals (16:26-28), the one who brought the goat to the desert as part of the Azazel ritual must wash his clothes and body before reentering the camp (16:26).

Why is this ritual referred to as “Azazel”? The Talmud quotes two possibilities: (1) because the mountain the goat is pushed off is “strong and hard,” or (2) because it brings atonement for the aspect of sin that caused the downfall of the angel whose name is Azazel. Perhaps Azazel himself mistakenly perceives the goat as being a gift to him, so refrains from prosecuting us on Yom Kippur – despite it really being just a mechanism for us to attain atonement by referencing the cause of his downfall.

Even though Azazel is the name of the ritual, and not the name of a location, after the Temple was built and the destination of the scapegoat – which cliff it was pushed off after leaving the Temple – was determined, that location (also) began to be referred to as “Azazel.”

Where is that location? Some tour guides say it’s Jebel Muntar, the highest peak in the Judean Wilderness, but as far as I can tell, this mountain has normal slopes and no cliff, so should be disqualified. Residents of Ma’ale Adumim, which is east of Jerusalem, apparently have a tradition that it’s the nearby cliffs, but they seem to be too close to the Temple (at least as the crow flies). Yoel Elitzur (Places in the Parasha, Yom Kippur), referencing the dispute on Yoma 67a regarding how far the cliff was from the Temple, says if the distance was 10 mil, the cliffs of Nachal Kidron fit,

whereas if was 12 mil, the cliffs of upper Nachal Dragot fit. (Both are southeast of Jerusalem.) Hopefully the Temple will be rebuilt very soon, and we won't need to guess! © 2024 Rabbi D. Kramer

SHLOMO KATZ

Hama'ayan

We introduce our Vidui / confession on Yom Kippur with the prayer: "You know the secrets of the universe and the most hidden mysteries of all the living. You probe all innermost chambers and test thoughts and emotions. Nothing is hidden from You, and nothing is concealed from Your eyes. And so may it be Your will, Hashem, our Elokim and the Elokim of our forefathers, that You forgive us for all our errors, and You pardon us for all our iniquities, and You atone for us for all our willful sins."

R' Avraham Yitzchak Hakohen Kook z"l (1865-1935; first Ashkenazic Chief Rabbi of Eretz Yisrael) writes that the praises of Hashem in this prayer parallel the three main parts of Teshuvah: regretting one's sin, changing one's ways, and accepting upon oneself not to return to that sin.

True regret requires understanding the negative effects that a Jew's sin has upon the entire universe. But who can really understand the effects of our sins other than Hashem? Only "You know the secrets of the universe and the most hidden mysteries of all the living."

And who can really say that he has completely abandoned his sinful ways? Only Hashem can know that! "You probe all innermost chambers and test thoughts and emotions."

Finally, do we really know what circumstances we will find ourselves in in the future such that we can be assured of not sinning again? We don't know. But, "Nothing is hidden from You, and nothing is concealed from Your eyes."

Even so, we plead, we have done our best. Therefore, please forgive, pardon, and atone. (Siddur Olat Re'iyah II p.353)



Appeasing Those We Have Hurt

Our Sages teach that one cannot achieve atonement unless he appeases those against whom he has sinned. Some say that one cannot achieve atonement even for his sins against G-d unless he has properly atoned for his sins against man and received forgiveness. (Kaf Ha'Chaim 606:3)

Why? Because atoning for only some sins is like immersing only part of one's body in a Mikvah. Obviously, one does not attain purity by doing so. (Mussar Ha'Mishnah)

R' Avraham Halevi Horowitz z"l (16th century; father of the Shelah Hakadosh) observes: The obligation to ask forgiveness from those we have offended does not mean doing what is commonly done, i.e., that shortly before Kol Nidrei, one approaches his friends and asks

their forgiveness. Inevitably, the friend responds, "You didn't do anything for which I have to forgive you." Then, these two friends forgive each other, something that was not necessary at all, since they were always dear to each other and would never wish each other harm.

In contrast, R' Horowitz continues, enemies tend not to ask forgiveness from one another. Rather, each one says, "If he were interested in peace, he would come to me." A wise man, however, recognizes that the true sign of strength is humility, and he takes the initiative to appease his enemy, even if his enemy is in the wrong. (Emek Berachah)

R' Shlomo Zalman Auerbach z"l writes: Requesting general forgiveness for all sins that one has committed against another is effective only for minor offenses. [If one committed a more serious offense, he must specify it when he requests forgiveness.] (Quoted in Halichot Shlomo: Mo'adim p.44)

If one who has sinned against you does not come to you to seek forgiveness, you should make yourself available to him so that he might ask forgiveness. (Mateh Ephraim)

Because Yom Kippur does not atone until one appeases his neighbor, one should be certain to recite the following prayer (part of Tefilah Zakkah) which is printed in many Machzorim: "I extend complete forgiveness to everyone who has sinned against me, whether physically or financially, or who has gossiped about me or even slandered me; so, too, anyone who has injured me, whether physically or financially, and for any sins between man and his neighbor--except for money that I wish to claim and that I can recover in accordance with Halachah, and except for someone who sins against me and says, 'I will sin against him and he will forgive me'--except for these, I grant complete forgiveness, and may no person be punished on my account.

"And just as I forgive everyone, so may You (Hashem) grant me favor in every person's eyes so that he will grant me complete forgiveness." © 2024 S. Katz & torah.org

