

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI MORDECHAI WILLIG

Communal Atonement

“**T**he scapegoat atones for all sins if one repents. Otherwise, it atones only for lesser sins. Grave sins, punishable by kares or misas beis din, as well as false or vain oaths, are not atoned.” (Rambam Teshuva 1:2)

Two questions arise. First, atonement without repentance, achieved vicariously via a scapegoat, seems impossible. After all, an offering of a wicked person is abominable (Mishlei 21:27). Second, why the distinction between lesser and grave sins?

Rav Soloveitchik zt"l answered both questions based on the Rambam's introductory phrase: "The scapegoat... is an atonement for all Israel." A wicked, unrepentant person has no individual atonement. However, he partakes of the communal atonement granted to Am Yisrael as such. Grave sins remove the person from the nation and preclude participation in the national atonement. Kares cuts the soul off from its people (Bamidbar 19:13).

The Rav zt"l cited the bracha recited on Yom Kippur: The King who pardons and forgives our sins and the sins (avonos) of His people Israel. Hashem forgives individuals, and the nation as a whole. He also removes our guilt (ashma), a term associated with desolation (shmama, Ramban Vayikra 5:19). Since Klal Yisrael will never be destroyed, the term guilt (ashma) is limited to individuals (On Repentance, 1996 ed., p. 97-109).

Presumably, removal from the nation by capital punishment resembles kares. And one who swears falsely or in vain is distanced by everyone, because others are punishable when one close to them swears falsely, more so than for other sins (Shevuos 39a,b). As such communal atonement is not possible for these sins.

Yom Kippur itself achieves atonement even in the absence of complete teshuva. We can postulate that this, too, is a national atonement, as the bracha

implies.

According to Rebbe (Yoma 85b), Yom Kippur atones for (nearly) all sins without teshuva. Why, then, was the Bais Hamikdash destroyed? [See Tosfos Yeshanim, who ask this question and suggest that the atonement is only partial.]

A nation is judged based on the majority of its people (Rambam Teshuva 3:1). Therefore, as the sins of Am Yisrael increased, the scapegoat no longer achieved full national atonement symbolized by red thread turning white (Yoma 39a, 67a). Similarly, Yom Kippur lost its effectiveness according to Rebbe. As a communal atonement, Yom Kippur requires a majority of individuals who repent and deserve atonement. Only then can the unworthy be included.

"Yom Kippur does not atone for interpersonal sins until one appeases [yeratzeh] the wronged person." (Yoma 85b)

"Even if the appeasement is continually rebuffed, Yom Kippur atones. It does not state until the wronged person is appeased [yisratzeh]" (Pri Chadash O.C. 606:1).

Conversely, if one grants forgiveness without being asked, it is not fully effective. For this reason, Rav appeared before the butcher who had wronged him, hoping that the butcher would appease him (Yoma 87a). Rav did not merely forgive him from afar.

Nonetheless, forgiving from afar is partially effective. This is evidenced by our forgiving all those who wronged us in Tefila Zakka on Yom Kippur eve. We pray that no one should be punished on our account, a phrase many say nightly. Forgiving others nightly results in longevity (Megilla 28a, M.B. 239:9).

Apparently, forgiving sins is comparable to forgiving money. It removes punishment on account of the one who was wrong and forgives. But it does not entitle the sinner to the atonement of Yom Kippur.

This can be explained based on our earlier analysis. One cannot enjoy communal atonement when removed from the community. Interpersonal sins remove the sinner from the wronged person and, by extension, from the community. If he appeases his fellow and asks repeatedly for forgiveness, he has done all that he can to make amends. As such, he reenters the community and benefits from Yom Kippur's communal atonement.

By contrast, the wrong person who does not grant forgiveness after three requests is the sinner. For this reason one should not ask forgiveness more than

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Chayim Yitchak ben Yehudo Hakohen
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three times (Rambam Teshuva 2:9). It is now assumed (chazaka) that the wrong person will not grant forgiveness. Asking him again would only make him a bigger sinner and, as such, is not allowed.

"It is customary to ask forgiveness on Erev Yom Kippur, as the midrash teaches:

Hashem ordained ten days of teshuva, during which even if one person repents, his teshuva is accepted like the teshuva of the community. Therefore, all Israel should repent and make peace between a man and his fellow, and forgive one another on Erev Yom Kippur so that their repentance and prayer should be received by Hashem with peace and with love." (Mordechai, Yoma 723)

This citation proves the aforementioned thesis. Yom Kippur is special because an individual's repentance is treated like that of a community. If one asks forgiveness of his fellow, he is included in the community, since he seeks closeness with everyone, even someone whom he has wronged and had been distanced from him.

The midrash adds two points. It includes all the ten days of teshuva, and mentions prayer as well. This is based on the Gemara (Rosh Hashana 18a): "Hashem is close to us whenever we call Him (Devarim 4:7). Yet it states (Yeshaya 55:6): 'Call Hashem when He is close', i.e., in Aseres Yemei Teshuva. The former refers to the community, the latter to an individual."

The midrash interprets that even in Aseres Yemei Teshuva, we require the merit of the tzibbur, but the teshuva of an individual is treated like that of a community. This is achieved only by asking forgiveness of one's fellow, which reintegrates the petitioner into the community and its atonement.

"To whom does Hashem grant atonement? To one who forgives others who wrong him" (Rosh Hashana 17a). One who overcomes his natural inclination to respond in kind to a person who pained him, but rather forgives the wrongdoer, belongs more strongly to the community. As such, he is granted the all-important communal atonement.

"The angels asked, 'Why does Yisrael not say Hallel on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur?' Hashem said, 'The King judges, the books of life and death are open, and Israel should say Hallel?'" (Arachin 10b)

The angels' very question is perplexing. It must be based on the statement, "There was no greater

holiday for Yisrael that Yom Kippur" (Taanis 26b), "a day of atonement" (30b). Am Yisrael is guaranteed atonement. This warrants Hallel, as the angels asked. Hashem responds that no individual is guaranteed to be part of the communal atonement. The individual fears judgment and death and cannot recite Hallel (Rabbi C.Y. Goldvicht z"l).

As we approach Yom Kippur, we should do all that we can to become more strongly connected to the tzibbur. We should both ask and grant forgiveness. We should do more to help other individuals and the community at large.

On Yom Kippur itself, we must include even sinners in our fast (Krisus 6b) and prayers (introduction to Kol Nidrei). It is a day to institute love and friendship and to forsake jealousy and competition (Mussaf).

May each and every one of us merit both the individual and communal atonement of Yom Kippur. May Am Yisrael forsake the baseless hatred which caused the Churban and merit the rebuilding of the Beis Hamikdash and the restoration of the powerful communal atonement of the Yom Kippur service.

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RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

The central theme of Yom Kippur is teshuva, commonly translated as "repentance." We hear so much about this term, but what, in fact does it truly mean?

On the simplest behavioral level, writes Maimonides, teshuvah involves "returning" to a situation in which one had previously failed, and not making the same mistake a second time. (Laws of Repentance 2:1) It means being given a second chance. No wonder, Yom Kippur has elements of joy. We celebrate being given a second chance. In too many of life's pursuits, we are given only one shot. If we miss, it's all over. On Yom Kippur, G-d says, "no matter if you have failed before; you can still return."

A chassid once asked his rebbe, "why pray on Yom Kippur, after all, we'll inevitably sin again." In response, the rebbe asked him to look out the window behind him. Outside was a toddler learning to walk. "What do you see?" asked the master. "A child, standing and falling," replied the disciple. Day after day the chassid returned to witness the same scene. At the week's end, the child stood and didn't fall. The child's eyes expressed the achievement of having attained the impossible. "So with us," said the rebbe. "We may fail again and again, but in the end, a loving G-d gives us the opportunities we need to succeed."

The mystics understand teshuvah differently. For them, teshuvah means "returning," to being righteous. But suppose one has never been righteous, what does one return to? Says the Sefat Emet, the soul of every person is fundamentally righteous. There may

be a layer of evil obscuring the inner being, but all people created in the image of G-d are inherently good. Teshuvah then, means to return to the inner kernel of goodness we all possess. And so, we sing, and dance on Yom Kippur. We celebrate the opportunity to discover our true selves.

Another classic story. Reb Zusha was on his death bed, and tears were streaming down his face. "Why are you crying?" asked his disciples. "If G-d asks me why I wasn't like Moses or Maimonides," answered Reb Zusha, "I'll say, I wasn't blessed with that kind of leadership ability and wisdom." But I'm afraid of another question," continued Reb Zusha, "what if G-d asks, 'Reb Zusha, why weren't you like Reb Zusha? Why didn't you find your inner being and realize your inner potential? Why didn't you find yourself?' That is why I am crying."

A third approach. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, among many other thinkers, understands teshuvah to mean "answer." That is to say teshuvah is a dialogue. On Yom Kippur we stand before G-d, a caring G-d who asks the question(s). We offer the answer(s). A G-d of love seeks us out. As much as we are in search of Him, He is in search of us. A comforting thought on Yom Kippur.

Yet another chassidic legend. A young girl came to the Ba'al Shem Tov - the father of chassidism - crying. "Why do you cry?" the rebbe lovingly asked. "I was playing hide and seek," said the young girl, "but no one came looking for me." "So, too, is it with G-d," reflected the Ba'al Shem Tov. "He, too, is crying. For as much as He is looking for us, we rarely look for Him."

It was left for Rav Avraham Yitzchak ha-Cohen Kook, the first Chief Rabbi of Israel to offer an understanding related to the establishment of the modern State of Israel. Teshuvah, according to Rav Kook, ought be understood eschatologically. It quite literally means "go home," to our homeland. It is not only an individual quest, but a communal mandate to establish a land that is different from all others. A land that is a light to the nations of the world: a land that marks the dawn of redemption, a land at peace. On this Yom Kippur - let it be, let it be. © 2010 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 BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

Forgiveness is a trait that is hard to receive and equally difficult to dispense. It is always a problem - theological and practical - how forgiveness is to be achieved. Personal hurts and wrongs burn deeply into our psyches and souls. Resentments at wrongs - real or imagined - done to us by others, fester within us and are deeply attached to our attitudes and behavior.

The Torah requirement for us to forgive others before Yom Kippur for their transgressions against us is a most difficult task to accomplish. And yet in the paradoxical way that human beings operate, we fully expect others to overlook our trespasses against them.

And if they do not do so kindly and quickly we are prone to treat them as poor losers. "Aw, come on, get over it!" is our motto. The greatness of Yom Kippur is that it comes to counteract this trend of attitude and behavior. We cannot expect G-d, so to speak, "to get over it" if we are ourselves unwilling to do so.

The Psalmist teaches us that G-d is our shadow at our right hand. Just as a shadow moves and reacts to the movement of the particular person so too does G-d, so to speak, move and react according to our movements and attitudes. Tolerance of others' foibles and errors is the beginning of forgiveness of others.

A reduced sense of ego, an acceptance of the fact the world is populated by imperfect people, that frictions and misunderstandings are the stuff of normal daily life and developing a heightened sense of inner security and self confidence - who cares what he said?! - all are the building blocks of forgiveness. And with that attitude, our Divine Shadow also shifts into the forgiving mode of Yom Kippur.

There is opinion in the Talmud that the day of Yom Kippur by itself cleanses a person of past sins. Even though this opinion is not accepted as halacha - true repentance of past sins must accompany the day of Yom Kippur in order for the slate to be wiped clean - it nevertheless highlights the special holy quality of this most wondrous day.

The one day in the year that we are granted a new beginning, a time that we close past books and issues and begin our lives anew - is the special quality of Yom Kippur. How many times in our lives have we thought to ourselves "if I could only start over again, I would be wiser and better." Well, Yom Kippur provides us with that opportunity.

However, like all opportunities in life, it must be grasped and taken advantage of. Thus, the day by itself is special and unique but what we do with it depends upon us - on our attitudes and behavior - on that day and on all the other days of the year that follow it. The fasting and privations of that holy day are meant to afford us the opportunity to change ourselves without having to face the ordinary mundane concerns of life for at least twenty five hours. And that is part of the blessing of that day to those who observe it.

I remember that as a child in the synagogue in Chicago where my father was the rabbi, I noticed two men who arrived early in the synagogue on Yom Kippur day and sat down and promptly fell asleep. They slept for most of the day and awoke only at the end of the services to hear the sounding of the final blast of the shofar. I remarked to my father that I did not understand their behavior. He told me in his gentle way: "Listen, my son, they did not violate any of the legal requirements of

Yom Kippur, but tragically they did not have a Yom Kippur either. The opportunities that Yom Kippur presents passed them by."

As a child I did not quite understand my father's statement, but over time I am beginning to understand the profundity of his simple words. The day of Yom Kippur carries with it many restrictions. These need to be observed and kept. But the day also brings with it myriad opportunities for contemplation, rededication and self-improvement.

Those opportunities have to be snatched and brought within us - within our inner selves as much as we are able to do so - and the time to do so is the day of Yom Kippur. The holiness of the day is palpable - it is a time for education and the renewal of values.

Frittering it away on skateboards will not, in any way, help the future generation meet the challenges and problems that it will surely face. This is not a matter of religious dogma. It is just pure common sense. © 2010 Rabbi Berel Wein- Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com. For more information on these and other products visit www.rabbiwein.com

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

One of the highlights of the Yom Kippur liturgy is the reading of the Book of Jonah, a small book containing a world of philosophy. The major message of Jonah is also the major message of Yom Kippur, so that a proper understanding of the former will most certainly illuminate the latter.

G-d tells Jonah, son of Amitai, to call the people of Ninveh to repentance. Jonah refuses to do so, and believes he can escape the G-d of the heavens of the earth by sailing away on the sea. The central issue of the Book of Jonah is why the prophet found a mission to Ninveh so objectionable. We must remember that Ninveh was the capital city of Assyria and Assyria was then the archenemy of Israel. Indeed, Assyria defeated the ten tribes and banished them into exile in the 8th century B.C.E. Jonah cannot understand why G-d 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 G-d by boarding a ship bound for Tarshish.

A raging storm develops, and a drawing of lots reveals that Jonah is responsible for it. It is fascinating to note that water is the major symbol of the Book of Jonah as well as of the Tishrei period of festivals. Water is both a symbol of life as well as of destruction. The Bible opens "and the spirit of G-d hovered over the face of the waters" and no life can grow without the presence of water. At the same time, the Bible tells us right before its description of the life giving waters that "there was darkness on the face of the tehom," usually translated

as the depths of the waters of the netherworld. It was after all the waters of the flood which threatened to destroy the world.

The Mishna tells us that on the Festival of Sukkot G-d judges how much rain we will receive in the coming year to enable fruit and vegetation to provide sustenance for us. Rain is therefore a symbol of G-d's gracious bounty, and His purification of His children on the Day of Forgiveness. As the prophet Yezekiel says in words which we repeat again and again during the Yom Kippur penitential prayers, "And I shall sprinkle upon you the waters of purification and you shall become pure" (Ezekiel 35: 24-25). Hence, the festival of Shemini Atzeret on which we thank G-d for rain has a double meaning: G-d's waters bring physical sustenance as well as spiritual purity. It is the combination of the two that brings us to redemption. It goes even one step deeper. We begin giving G-d praise as the One whom "causes the winds to blow and the rains to flow" on Shemini Atzeret - and these words of praise are incorporated in the Amidah blessing of the G-d "Who causes the dead to live again." G-d's purifying waters can even revive us from death and bring us eternal life.

Jonah is cast overboard into the raging waters. He has endeavored to escape his Divine mission, and is therefore worthy of death. G-d, however, in His infinite compassion provides a great fish - a creature of the water - to follow Jonah and revive him. In Jonah's own words, "I called, in my distress, to G-d 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 G-d" (Jonah 2:3-7).

The waters almost destroyed Jonah and the waters in the form of a water-creature sent by G-d saved his life. G-d is trying to teach the crucial lesson that Assyria, who has been so evil and destructive, can and must make a complete turnaround if the world is to be redeemed. G-d 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 which is derived from *emet*, truth.

Truth demands that evil never be overlooked; evil must be punished. This is precisely how Jonah explains why he refused G-d's mission "...this is why I hastened to flee to Tarshish; I knew that you are a gracious and merciful G-d slow to anger abundant in loving kindness and forgiving of evil" (Jonah 4:2). This is not the G-d in whom I want to believe, the G-d who described Himself earlier to Moses as the One who is "abundant in loving kindness and truth" (Exodus 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, Jonah, undeservedly saved from the raging waters. G-d is trying to teach him that the G-d of compassion will bestow His life giving purity even upon those who have sinned.

On Yom Kippur each of us descends into the "waters of death." We wear the white reminiscent of shrouds, we remove ourselves from all physical necessities and pleasures such as food, drink, and sex, and we wear non-leather shoes like the mourner. For whom are we mourning? We are mourning for ourselves who have died because of our sins.

However, G-d in his compassion returns us to life on Yom Kippur, reborn and purified. G-d sprinkles upon us His life giving waters "because on this day you shall be forgiven of all your sins; before G-d shall you stand pure." All of us experience the death and the rebirth of Jonah. As the final Mishnah in Yoma says, "how fortunate are you O Israel! Before whom are you purified, and who purifies you? Our Father in Heaven."

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RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

“**M**ay there be a willingness from before You, Hashem, our G-d and the G-d of our forefathers, that You grant us forgiveness for all of our sins, and pardon us for all of our iniquities, and grant us atonement for all of our acts of rebellion." After this introduction, we list over 50 categories of sins that we are asking G-d to forgive us for, including "for the sin that we have sinned before You through confession of [just] the mouth," i.e. mentioning the sin without paying enough attention to what we are saying for it to facilitate a change in our behavior. "Viduy" (confession) is an integral part of the "teshuva process," the process of repenting and returning to G-d (see Rambam, Hilchos Teshuva 1:1 and 2:2-3); "going through the motions" of confessing without the confession contributing towards eradicating the damage of the sin is itself a sin, and requires its own confession (as part of doing teshuva for it).

Last week, after posting a link on Twitter to my piece on Rosh Hashana, I asked for suggestions for topics for Yom Kippur and Succos (suggestions, questions and comments can always be emailed to RabbiDMK at yahoo.com). Eli Cohen from Boro Park suggested that I discuss the Chidushay HaRim's comments and recommendations regarding Viduy. I was unfamiliar with what the Chidushay HaRim had written, so Eli emailed me a photocopy of it, part of the Chidushay HaRim's first piece on Yom Kippur. (Thank you, Eli!)

After explaining how each moment of our lives has its own purpose that we are supposed to fulfill, and that failure to fulfill that moment's purpose can never be compensated for (as that next moment has its own purpose to fulfill), the Chidushay HaRim discusses the dangers of trying to undo the damage done by sinning in one moment by spending another moment trying to "turn away from the evil" previously done: "[In the process of trying to turn away from evil], behold he is

thinking about the damage done, and [since] a person exists in the place where the thought process is, with all of his life-force, he is then emerged in the evil." The Chidushay HaRim then expresses concern that this may prevent a person from ever being able to repent for the sin (as he is reliving it instead), and that it could lead to depression, "G-d forbid." Rather than meaning "uprooting evil," the Chidushay HaRim suggests that "turning away from evil" means not doing or thinking about evil at all; instead, "do good," i.e. do "piles of mitzvos" in place of the "piles of sins" that had been done.

According to the Chidushay HaRim, the focus before Yom Kippur is to leave our sinful ways (which is also one of the components of "teshuva" enumerated by the Rambam), sincerely, but without letting it disrupt our peace of mind to the point of being counterproductive, committing to acting properly from now on (yet another of the components of "teshuva") while retaining a healthy sense of being. Therefore, the Chidushay HaRim recommends saying "Viduy" quickly so as not to let the recollection of the ugliness of sin ruin the moment of purity that is Yom Kippur; we should reflect on our request that G-d rule over us exclusively (i.e. directly and openly) rather than on how devastated we are at having sinned.

Rav Eliyahu Dessler z"l also wrote about there being dangerous aspects to saying "Viduy" (Michtav Mei'Eliyahu II. Pgs. 55-56), including how spending too much time confessing can possibly lead to thinking about the sin itself, even desiring it. When I mentioned this Chidushay HaRim to Rabbi Elchanan Adler, shlita (a Rosh Yeshiva at REITS, Yeshiva University), he suggested that this may be what lies at the center of the Talmudic dispute as to whether one should list specific sins when saying "Viduy" or just admit to having sinned. Nevertheless, we do list specific sins (when possible); the warning of the Chidushay HaRim and Rav Dessler to be careful when doing so indicates that despite the danger there is a purpose to listing them without getting too involved in thinking about each specific sin. I would like to explore what we are supposed to gain from listing sins in an almost superficial manner, why this is not considered "confessions of [just] the mouth," what would qualify as such if we are not supposed to think about the sins themselves when mentioning them, and how we can "uproot" the stain left by sin if we don't think long and hard about the sin(s) we committed.

In a piece on the High Holiday season (Michtav Mei'Eliyahu II, pg. 62), Rav Dessler says that we are defined by the things we want, the drives we have, and what we aspire to. This aspect stays with us even after the soul leaves the body, making it impossible for someone who craves physical things to be content in a purely spiritual existence, while making that same existence completely enjoyable to someone that only desires spirituality. Rather than uprooting the stain of sin by thinking long and hard about the sin committed,

working on minimizing our need for physical pleasure and increasing our level of spirituality allows us to fix the root of the problem rather than just a "branch" of it, while avoiding the possibility of getting caught up in the specific sin. Listing the sins we may have committed, even without thinking too long about them, helps us realize how important it is to take care of the cause of all of these issues. Similarly (or perhaps just worded differently), working on ourselves to put G-d's will before our own can help us avoid making the same mistakes again; listing all of the things that went wrong because we put our own desires first shows why we must make G-d's will primary.

Another way we can be more certain of not sinning again without focusing on the sinful act is to try figuring out how to prevent its re-occurrence, which safeguards can be put in place to minimize the chances of being faced with similar temptation. Listing the sins we must work on allows us to recall which areas we must put that work into, even if that "work" isn't centered around the sin itself, but on how we got to the sin. Here too, reading the "Viduy" quickly does not excuse us from the hard work involved in the "teshuva process," helping us focus on that work without the risk of putting ourselves in a "place of evil."

Finally, if we take a closer look at the wording of the Rambam, we notice two things. First of all, "Viduy" is the final step of the "teshuva process," not the first (or second or third) step. Secondly (as Rav Yitzchok Celnik, shlita, Rav of the Alumni Minyan of the Yeshiva Gedola of Passaic, pointed out when I discussed these issues with him), the "Viduy" described by the Rambam is not the same "Viduy" we say on Yom Kippur, indicating that they serve two distinct functions. Although ideally we would complete our "teshuva process" before the shofar signaling the end of Yom Kippur was blown, realistically it takes a lot longer than that; for most of us, a successful Yom Kippur constitutes formulating a practical game plan for doing so. It can therefore be suggested that, for most people, the "Viduy" we say on Yom Kippur is the start of the process; we therefore must take care not to get caught up in the "moment of sin" while reciting it. The "Viduy" said at the end of the process, on the other hand, comes after we have already successfully stopped sinning, fully regretted the sin (including uprooting the stain it left), and can confidently say (or have said about us) that we will not commit this sin ever again. When we get there (with G-d's help), there will no longer be a danger of getting caught up in thinking about the sin when saying "Viduy" about it.

However, until we reach that point, the danger of putting ourselves back in the "moment of evil" still exists. In the meantime, saying "Viduy" in way that causes us to realize that we must improve (and in which areas) without bringing us back to the sin has tremendous value. And reading the words without

taking advantage of that value is something that requires a confession of its own. © 2010 Rabbi D. Kramer

RABBI NAFTALI REICH

Legacy

The sun is already beginning to set in the western sky. As the precious final minutes of the holiest day of the year slip away, we reach one of its celebrated high points—the haftorah reading which relates the story of Jonah and the whale.

This famous yet thoroughly baffling story opens with Hashem sending Jonah as a divine messenger to the huge Assyrian metropolis of Ninveh. The city had descended to a level of decadence that was simply intolerable, and destruction was imminent. Only immediate repentance would bring about a reprieve. Jonah, however, does not want to undertake this mission, and he attempts to flee from Hashem. He books passage on a ship which will carry him far away from Ninveh, but a sudden storm threatens to tear the ship apart. The sailors cast lots, and Jonah is tossed into the sea, where he is swallowed by a whale.

From the belly of the whale, Jonah cries out to Hashem in anguish and despair and pleads for deliverance. Hashem answers Jonah's prayer. The whale spits him out onto the shore, and he sets off at once for Ninveh, where his message is greeted with consternation. The people don sackcloth and repent, and the city is spared.

The obvious question leaps at us from the page: Jonah was undoubtedly a very holy man if Hashem granted him the gift of prophecy. How then did he have the effrontery to refuse to serve as the messenger of Heaven?

Our Sages tell us that Jonah was concerned for the welfare of the Jewish people who, at that time, were also guilty of grievous sins in spite of the repeated warnings of the great prophets. They explain Jonah feared the people of evil Ninveh, a nation of degenerate pagans, would heed his prophetic warning and repent, causing the Jewish people, the custodians of the Torah, to suffer by comparison. They would stand indicted before the bar of Heavenly justice with nothing to say in their own defense. Therefore, Jonah chose to flee rather than bring down retribution on the heads of his people.

But the questions still remain: Did Jonah think he could frustrate the divine plan by fleeing on a ship? Did he think Hashem would find no other way to offer Ninveh the option of repentance? And even if he thought his flight could somehow benefit the Jewish people, what right did he have to suppress the prophecy entrusted to him?

Furthermore, what lesson are we meant to derive from this story in the climactic moments of Yom Kippur? Is it only meant to present us with another example of disaster avoided through timely repentance?

Or is there also a deeper significance in the central theme of the story, which revolves around Jonah's attempt to extricate himself from his mission?

The commentators explain that Jonah certainly had no illusions about thwarting the divine plan. If Hashem wanted to warn Ninveh that only repentance could save them, He undoubtedly would. However, Jonah had such an overpowering love for the Jewish people that he could not bear to be the agent of their misfortune. In desperation, he resolved to flee so that Hashem's will would be fulfilled through some other channel. He was fully aware of the magnitude of his act and the dire consequences he would probably suffer for his disobedience, but the alternative was unbearable.

Hashem, however, chose not to send a different messenger to Ninveh. Instead, He sent storms and whales to force Jonah to return and accept his mission. The message to Jonah was very clear, and it resonates down through the ages to reach us every Yom Kippur. Jonah had no right to weigh the pros and cons of obeying Hashem's command. He did not have the option of deciding whether or not to obey. If Hashem commanded him to go to Ninveh, then that was what he was obliged to do, and no amount of rationalization could change it. A person has to subjugate himself completely to the divine will, to obey without question, reservation or rationalization. Hashem undoubtedly knew of Jonah's love for his people, and if He nevertheless sent him on his mission, Jonah had no choice but to obey.

In our own lives, we sometimes bend the rules to suit our convenience. We fall into the trap of "situation ethics," seeking a middle ground between our desires and the dictates of our Creator. We rationalize. We equivocate. We compromise. Like Jonah, we seek to escape the strictures imposed on us by our innermost conscience. But in actuality, as Jonah discovered so painfully, it is not for us to make value judgments about the divine will. Total acceptance may indeed be difficult from time to time, but overall, it is the only path to spiritual tranquillity and fulfillment. © 2010 Rabbi N. Reich & torah.org

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

Virtual Beit Medrash

STUDENT SUMMARIES OF SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA HARAV YEHUDA AMITAL SHLIT" A

Adapted by Yitzchak Barth; Translated by Kaeren Fish

““ **A**nd G-d passed over before him, and he called out'-Rabbi Yochanan said: Were it not for the text itself saying this, such a thing could never be said. This teaches us that the Holy One wrapped Himself (in a tallit) like a 'shaliach tzibbur' (prayer leader) and showed Moshe the order of prayer. He said to him: Whenever Israel sins, let them perform this order before Me, and I shall forgive them?

Rav Yehuda said: There is a covenant made concerning the Thirteen Attributes that they do not return empty, as it is written, 'Behold, I make a covenant.'" (Rosh Hashana 17b)

At the center of our prayers and supplications on the days of Selichot, culminating with Yom Kippur, stands the recitation of the "Thirteen Attributes." What is the meaning of the expression, "The Holy One wrapped Himself like a shaliach tzibbur?"

Moshe Rabbeinu asked G-d: "Show me Your glory" (Shemot 33:18). Rambam explains (Hilkhot Yesodei HaTorah 1:10) that it never entered Moshe's mind to know G-d's essence; he asked only to know the truth of His existence. The Holy One is unique and beyond our ability to grasp. The world's existence is not necessary, but existence without G-d is completely impossible. Moshe Rabbeinu asked to apprehend the truth of G-d's existence in a distinct manner, "so that the knowledge of G-d in his heart would be just like knowing someone whose face he had seen, and whose image was engraved in his consciousness, such that that person would be distinguished in his mind from other people. Thus Moshe Rabbeinu asked that the existence of the Holy One would be distinguished in his heart from the existence of all else." (ibid.)

In response to Moshe's request, the Holy One enwrapped Himself, as it were- teaching that mortal man cannot completely grasp His reality: "You shall see My back, but My face you shall not see" (Shemot 33:22). But there was a sense of complete presence; it was clear that behind the tallit covering, there was something great and mighty-and this finds expression in the uttering of the Thirteen Attributes.

We are far from the level of Moshe Rabbeinu. The desire to know the real essence of G-d's existence does not concern us; we are satisfied with the Rambam's explanation (ibid., laws 1-4) that the existence of G-d-in contrast with the existence of the world-is uncontingent and unconditional. At the same time, we still feel a strong desire and we pray: "Show us Your ways!" We want to see and understand the Kingship of G-d, His rule over the world.

There are times when the Divine ways of ruling the world are not clearly seen: the Holy One enwraps and covers Himself, as it were. Sometimes, because of a period of suffering-a week, a year, an era-we cannot see the complete picture.

Sometimes G-d is altogether wrapped; at other times He "peeks through the lattice," and we see His mercies and His small miracles. This year we saw the Holy One peeking through the cracks: through the war against Iraq, He saved us from one of the greatest existential dangers facing the State of Israel. But what we have seen in the last few weeks-the terrible, murderous terrorist attacks-and also during the last few years: here the paths of G-d's providence are hidden from us. Nevertheless, specifically now we must declare that we sense G-d's presence with certainty!

A lecturer in philosophy once told me that today we know that there are more than five senses. There is an additional sense, called the "sense of presence." A person who is in a room senses if someone else is with him. I do not know whether this is scientifically correct, but as far as we are concerned, it is true with regard to G-d. Even when the Holy One is wrapped, as it were, we sense that there is something behind that outer wrapping; we sense that He is with us.

The gemara quoted above reveals to us G-d's ways in the covenant of the Thirteen Attributes: "The Holy One wrapped himself like a shaliach tzibbur." The gemara continues with a practical instruction: "Let them perform this order before Me". G-d revealed the Thirteen Attributes in order that we may learn from them about His ways, that we may learn how to act.

We should learn from this covenant that every one of us must radiate kindness, mercy and other positive attributes, but his inner essence should remain "enwrapped." A person's presence should be felt: he need not nullify or hide himself; he must act and achieve, but he should do so without advertising his own self, his personality. When a person sins, when he feels depressed or despairing, "Let them perform this order before Me"-every person should consider himself a shaliach tzibbur, and radiate a sense of emulating G-d's attributes. The Midrash teaches:

"And I shall be gracious to whom I shall be gracious'-At that time G-d revealed to Moshe all the treasures stored as reward for the righteous. Moshe asked, 'This treasure-for whom is it meant?' And G-d answered, 'For those who perform mitzvot.'

'And this treasure-for whom is it meant?'

'For those who raise orphans.'

And so on, for each treasure. Then G-d showed him a great treasure, and Moshe asked, 'Whose treasure is this?'

G-d answered him, "Whoever has his own [treasure, due to his actions]? I give him from his own reward; whoever has not? I give him for free, from this. As it is written, 'And I shall be gracious ("chanoti," connected here as denoting a free gift) to whom I shall be gracious.'" (Shemot Rabba, 45)

Someone who gives G-d the feeling that there is nothing at all that is rightfully his, and that all that he possesses is thanks to G-d's mercy; one who recognizes that it is the Holy One Who has blessed him with all of his strengths and talents ("Yours, G-d, is charity, we have shame; I am embarrassed and ashamed to lift my face to You"); those people who say that they deserve nothing-for them G-d reserves the greatest reward.

These, then, are the two pieces of advice stemming from these aggadot: to wrap oneself like a shaliach tzibbur, and to feel that we have nothing owing to us, and that we rely on G-d's free gifts.

On the first night of Selichot, we say, "At the end of the day of rest we greet You first-to hear THE

SONG AND THE PRAYER." This expression is taken from the prayer offered by Shlomo after the Beit Ha-Mikdash was completed. Prayer has an element of exalted song, declaring G-d's praise. Elsewhere, song ("rina") refers to the most heartfelt prayer:

"Arise, sing in the night, at the beginning of the watches; pour out your heart like water before G-d..." (Eikha 2:19)

One of the commentaries explains that "singing" here refers to silent prayer-prayer that does not make itself heard, prayer of the heart.

King David prayed:

"A lesson ('maskil') of David, when he was in the cave, a prayer: I cry with my voice to G-d; I make my supplication with my voice to Him... Hear my song, for I am very low..." (Tehillim 142).

There is a prayer that turns into inner song: when a person understands that he has no hope of salvation and that only G-d, in His great mercy, can help him, then like King David-after all his crying out-he asks: "Hear my song!"

We use this time of the year to take stock; each person knows what afflicts his soul. We see what is happening to us: for years we prided ourselves on having solutions to every problem, and now-"We do not know what to do." We turn to G-d and cry, "Yours, G-d, is charity... the soul is Yours and the body is Your work; have mercy on Your nation!"

Our soul is thirsty for You; it cannot exist without You. "We are called after Your Name; G-d, act for the sake of Your Name!" At this point our prayer turns into rina, into silent song. We must learn to pray, and recognize that we have no solutions other than prayer.

May the Holy One hear our prayers, and may we and all of Israel merit to be inscribed and sealed for a good year! (*This sicha was delivered on the first night of Selichot, Elul 5763 [2003].*)

