

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

“For on this day He shall forgive you to purify you from all of your transgressions; before the Lord shall you be purified.”

This last phrase, "before the Lord shall you be purified," is for me the truest meaning of Yom Kippur. Yom Kippur is, after all, the most complex and comforting day of the year: a day of self-sacrifice and divine forgiveness, a day of discipline and deprivation and a day of overflowing love and never-ending compassion, a day of mortal fear, and a day of divine embrace and loving-kindness. We may enter Yom Kippur laden with guilt, but we leave it redeemed. Above all, Yom Kippur involves standing before G-d - just you and Him - and becoming pure.

From this perspective, the most striking image of Yom Kippur is the very last act of the High Priest in his Yom Kippur garb. He bathes a fourth time, puts on his white linen garments, and enters the Holy of Holies, the space sanctified with the overwhelming sense of the Divine Presence. Earlier, he had performed in that place a difficult and even trying sacrificial offering, his gift of fragrant incense. This time, he enters the Presence and stands there, without performing a divine service, without reciting a formal prayer. Then he leaves, bathes a fifth time, and dons the golden garments of the regular daily afternoon sacrifice.

His solitary moment with G-d has ended; the magic of the special Day of Forgiveness is over. But what did it mean? What did he, and what do we, take out of that singular meeting with the divine, devoid of ritual or ceremony, at the conclusion of the most sacred day of the year in the most sacred space in the world? Let us for a moment re-visit last week's commentary on the akeda. Abraham and Isaac walk a solitary walk during those three momentous days of performing G-d's awesome commandment: A tense silence between father and son permeates the atmosphere, punctuated by brief, difficult and ambiguous words. The air is heavy

with G-d's unspoken command, heard only by Abraham, fearfully sensed by Isaac.

But what was G-d's command? He asked Abraham to take Isaac as an olah - but what does this mean? Is it a whole-burnt offering, a slaughter-sacrifice, or is it merely a dedication of Isaac's life to G-d's will? The midrash (Genesis Raba, Vayeira, 56:4) has an extra "character" show up during this journey - Satan. He cries out to Abraham, "Old man, old man, have you lost your mind? Are you about to slaughter the son given to you at 100 years of age? Tomorrow I shall charge you with spilling blood, with spilling the blood of your own son."

And Abraham must now be pondering, "Is this attempt to turn me away from doing what G-d ordered the word of Samael? Perhaps what I thought I heard yesterday was the word of Samael? Perhaps G-d only wants me to dedicate Isaac in life, and it is Satan-Moloch who wants me to murder my beloved child!" Let us now skip many generations, and perhaps we will understand why the divine command is ambiguous, why G-d used a word, olah, which could be interpreted in two ways. Rav Oshri, the rabbi of the Kovno Ghetto at the time of the Holocaust, wrote a book of Responsa, "Mima'amakim" ["From the Depths"] based on his experience. One question came from a distraught father, whose only son had been taken for a kinderaktion - a 5 a.m. children's round-up to the gas chambers of Auschwitz.

"I have a gold tooth," wept the father. "The kapo will take it from me and free my son - but he will have to substitute someone else's son to meet the quota. What must I do?" Rav Oshri tearfully responded that he could not give the father an answer. All that night, he saw the agitated man walking back and forth in front of his house. When the Rav walked out at 4:45 a.m., the tearful father could only say two words, Akedat Yitzhak.

He did not give the kapo his tooth.

Each of us must stand alone, in the fullness of our being, before G-d, and attempt to understand what G-d wants of us. What is the right path? Is it G-d's voice we are hearing, or Satan's? This is the meaning of the meeting between G-d and the High Priest - without ritual or formal prayer - at the conclusion of our Holy Fast.

And since this divine-human confrontation takes place on the day of forgiveness and purity, we may be reasonably certain that if we are honest with ourselves, we will correctly interpret G-d's words of love,

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

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NEWSLETTER DISTRIBUTED VIA EMAIL
AND THE WEB AT WWW.AISHDAS.ORG/TA.
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RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

“**A**nd repentance, and prayer, and charity, remove the bad parts of the decree.” Although the literal translation of these words would seem to be “pass over the bad parts of the decree,” implying that even though the decree remains intact we can avoid its consequences by repenting and/or praying and/or giving charity, the Talmudic-era sources for this notion, which use words such as “negate” (Beraishis Rabbah 44:12) and “rip up” (Rosh Hashanah 16b) clearly indicate that the bad parts of the decree no longer exist afterwards. Much of the focus of Yom Kippur (and the “Ten Days of Repentance”) is trying to get the King of Judgment (G-d) to reconsider the decrees He issued on Rosh Hashanah, so that the future will be better than they otherwise would have been. I have previously discussed one aspect of how the judgment can be changed (see <http://aishdas.org/ta/5769/yomKippur.pdf>, but would like to discuss how these three things (repentance, prayer and charity) can change a decree that was based on our actions over the past year, since those actions were already done.

Although the concept of repentance causing our deeds to be considered as if they had never been done (or not done purposely) is rather innovative (and an act of supreme kindness performed by G-d each and every year), once the concept exists we can easily understand how real repentance can bring about a change in the decree. After all, it was our actions that led to the original decree being issued, and if it's considered as if we didn't really do those things that led to the decree, it would follow that that specific decree no longer applies. But what about prayer and charity? Why/how can beseeching G-d and giving charity change a decree that was based on our actions, if the record of our actions remains intact?

Rambam (Hilchos T'shuva 2:4) tells us that a penitent offers supplications and gives charity, leading some to suggest that the “prayer and charity” referred to in this piyut (poem) are part of the process of repentance. The Talmudic-era sources add additional

factors that can negate a bad decree, and many commentators explain how these factors help promote repentance. If prayer alone, or giving charity alone, cannot change the decree, but are only included in the piyut because they are so primary to the process of repentance, it is the repentance itself that negates the decree, a concept that is well-established in our tradition. However, one of the proof-texts cited for charity being able to affect an already-issued decree is “charity can save one from death” (Mishlay 10:2), which clearly indicates that charity in and of itself can accomplish this, not just as part of the process of repenting.

Eitz Yosef, in his commentary on B'raishis Rabbah, says that these three things can cause a person to become worthy of “hashgacha p'ratis,” divine intervention on a personal level, rather than only the general divine intervention (“hashgacha k'lalis”) intended for everybody (or all in a defined group). He doesn't spell out how this causes the bad parts of the previously issued decree to become nullified (or avoided), but applying the concept isn't difficult.

When discussing the “awesomeness” of the day, the author of the piyut describes how every single person “passes before G-d,” one-by-one, to be judged individually, like a shepherd counts each of his sheep. In other words, even those who are not on the level of meriting personalized divine intervention, and are thereby left unprotected from the consequences of “hashgacha k'lalis” (see Rabbeiny Bachye on Beraishis 18:19) are judged individually at least once a year. Obviously, this judgment is based on their actions, and will determine what will happen to each individual during the next year (until the next judgment occurs). If what happens during the year is based G-d's determination of what each individual deserves, doesn't everyone benefit from individualized divine intervention? Is there a practical difference if a person is judged just once a year or judged everyday (see Rosh Hashanah 16a)? It would therefore seem that the judgment that occurs on Rosh Hashanah (and is finalized on Yom Kippur) determines whether or not the results of “hashgacha k'lalis” are appropriate for this individual. If they are not, adjustments are made accordingly.

“Hashgacha k'lalis” is comprised of numerous components, each of which is a divine decree, albeit a decree that was not made for any specific individual. For example, G-d decreed that every substance should have a gravitational pull (relative to its mass), which causes things to fall to the ground. There wasn't a separate or specific decree for each leaf to fall from a tree; there was a decree that everything has a gravitational pull, and the earth's strong gravitation pull causes each and every leaf to fall to the ground when it becomes detached from its tree. (Where it falls is the result of other natural laws, each of which is a separate divine decree, such as the air flow (e.g. wind) that affects its path to the ground.) Other natural laws, each

of which was a separate divine decree, combine to form things like earthquakes and hurricanes, which can strongly impact people. Another component of "hashgacha k'lalis" is "g'zairas hak'lal," decrees made against a specific, defined group, such as against a city that has angered G-d (see Rambam, Hilchos T'shuva 3:2), where all those in the city who do not merit divine protection are adversely affected, even those that did not participate in the sin that brought G-d's wrath against that city. Free will is also a component of "hashgacha k'lalis," as G-d decreed that we have the ability to choose right from wrong, and unless there is a reason to prevent those choices from being successfully carried out (i.e. if it would adversely affect someone deserving of divine protection), the choice made can affect others too. [Decisions that are not made through free will can affect things too, but the factors involved in that kind of decision making is too complex to be used as an illustration. Nevertheless, each of the factors that led to such a decision were ultimately the result of a divine decree, and since (if?) those decrees were not intended specifically to bring about the decision (or its consequences), they also qualify as "hashgacha k'lalis."]

One of the consequences of not being worthy of "hashgacha p'ratis" is the possibility of being adversely affected by things that result from "hashgacha k'lalis," even if the specific consequence does not directly relate to a specific misdeed. Being subject to "mikre" (the aggregate of "hashgacha k'lalis" decrees) is in and of itself a punishment, a punishment for not attaining the level worthy of the divine protection afforded by "hashgacha p'ratis" (see Meiri on Sotah 2b). However, since the amount one is affected by "mikre" can vary greatly, a yearly (external) audit is made to make sure that the amount each person will be affected is not completely incongruous with what is deserved. G-d knows what the future holds for each individual, and if, after the yearly audit/judgment it is determined that the affects of "hashgacha k'lalis" need to be adjusted, they are. Whereas those worthy of "hashgacha p'ratis" are protected from any adverse affect of "hashgacha k'lalis" that is not completely and directly deserved, those not worthy of such protection are only shielded from what was determined on Rosh Hashanah/Yom Kippur to be extremely adverse.

According to Eitz Yosef, repentance, prayer and charity are vehicles through which one can become worthy of divine protection, thereby avoiding the consequences of "mikre" that would have been allowed to occur based on the decree issued on Rosh Hashanah. Rather than repentance voiding the decree because the sins that led to the decree are retroactively erased, it bypasses the decree by strengthening the relationship with G-d to the point where G-d will no longer allow the adverse consequences of the original decree to occur. This difference is more than just semantics, as since the protection is the result of the

closer relationship with G-d, if that relationship is not maintained, the protection is lost too. Prayer is a primary way of fostering our relationship with G-d, and can therefore bring one close enough to Him to warrant divine protection.

How giving charity changes one's status from "hashgacha k'lalis" to "hashgacha p'ratis" is not as straightforward; Eitz Yosef says that being merciful to others will cause G-d to act mercifully with us as well. The proof-text used by B'raishis Rabbah indicates that giving charity allows one direct access to G-d ("seeing His face"); Rashbatz (Rosh Hashanah 16b) implies that giving charity is loved so much by G-d that He overlooks shortcomings, a concept that could also be used to explain why/how it accomplishes so much.

Aside from fostering a closer relationship with G-d and thereby making someone worthy of divine protection, prayer indicates a recognition of Who is the Source of all things. After all, we wouldn't ask G-d for something if we didn't think He could provide it. It is not uncommon for some to think that they can do things on their own, attributing success to "my strength and the might of my hands" (Devarim 8:17). If military strength or financial acumen causes one to forget G-d, He may send an external threat or an economic downturn to bring us back to reality. If we turn to G-d, asking him to help us be more secure (militarily and/or financially), there would be no reason to decree anything that would cause us to ask Him for help—we already are! Similarly, if a decree was made on Rosh Hashanah in order to get us to turn to him for help, and before the decree was enacted we already started praying to him, there would no longer be a need for such a decree, and it would be voided.

Besides being part of the repentance process, and a means to get G-d to pay us special heed, charity is lauded throughout Rabbinic literature. The Talmud (Bava Basra 11a) relates the story of someone who provided food to a needy family, saving them from starvation. Even though it had been decreed that his life would end, the heavenly angels interceded, successfully arguing that G-d can't take the life of someone who saved the lives of others. Charity is not limited to financial support, and it can easily be suggested that helping others in a specific area will provide protection from being harmed in that area. Machzor Mesores HaRav implies that charity can cause a decree to be negated because "sin is a result of selfishness," whereas "Tzedakah (charity), in contrast, demonstrates sympathy, compassion, and willingness to share with others." Although this is a very valid point, it would seem that this should only apply to charity done to help others; if the charity was done in order to negate a bad decree, it would still be a selfish act.

Rav Dessler z"l (Michtav Mei'Eliyahu II 74-77) discusses how there could be two days of Rosh Hashanah, both of them be called "Yom HaDin" ("The Day of Judgment"). He suggests that on the first day we

are judged regarding our own worthiness, what we will be granted for our own sake, while on the second day we are judged regarding what we are worth on behalf of others (those who are worthy in their own right). Even if we were not (G-d forbid) judged favorably on the first day, based on how much we contribute to the community (which includes those who are worthy) and help others in their spiritual growth, we can receive a favorable judgment on the second day. Based on this, it could be suggested that charity, whether it be financial support or volunteer work (or anything that helps others) can negate a bad decree because doing more for others makes us more valuable to the "team." By becoming more involved in the community (in a positive way), we have a better chance of being "remembered, and written, for life." © 2011 Rabbi D. Kramer

MACHON ZOMET

Shabbat B'Shabbato

*by Rabbi Mordechai Greenberg,
Rosh Yeshiva, Kerem B'Yavne*

“For this mitzva which I command you today is not hidden or far from you..." [Devarim 30:11]. According to the Ramban, this verse is referring to the mitzva of teshuva, repentance, which appears before this in the passage, "And you will return to your G-d" [30:2]. Rabeinu Yona comments, "Even though we are obligated by this all the time, there is an additional obligation on Yom Kippur," as is written, "You will be purified before G-d" [Vayikra 16:30]. But we may well ask: Why is there a need for a mitzva of teshuva on Yom Kippur if we are obligated by the mitzva all year round?

The Rambam discusses two types or stages of repentance-atonement for deeds and fixing character traits. "Do not think that teshuva is relevant only for sins that involve actions, such as prostitution, robbery, and theft. Rather, just as a person must repent for such things, so he is obligated to search among his traits, and to repent for anger, hatred, jealousy, trickery, and from pursuit of money and honor and chasing after food, and so on. It is necessary to repent from everything, and these sins are more difficult than those based on specific acts. When a person sinks into such things it is very difficult to get away from them." [Hilchot Teshuva 7:2].

When a person repents from evil acts, he has not yet mended his character in any way. Perhaps he no longer actively shows anger, but in his nature he remains an angry person. He may not engage in illicit sex, but in essence he remains a person of lust. As the Rambam writes, "If a man sins and lies down with a woman, and later on is alone with her and still loves her but is able not to repeat the sin-that is full repentance." [Hilchot Teshuva 2:1]. But it is not the highest level of teshuva, which the Rambam describes further on as when the person modifies his traits and no longer has

any lust. This is teshuva "which brings a person closer to the Divine presence... The previous night G-d hated this person, he was detested, kept far away, and an abomination. Today he is beloved, pleasant, close by, and a friend." [7:6].

Such teshuva, improving our character, is what the Rambam refers to as "purity." He ends the Book of Purity with passages from the Agadda, and he writes that the laws of ritual purity and impurity are examples of a "chok," something that cannot be understood based on human logic, but that in spite of this they have a lesson for us. "Just as one who has the proper intentions in his heart to become pure is purified when he immerses in a mikveh... the same is true of one who wants in his heart to cleanse his soul from spiritual impurities-sinful thoughts and bad traits. When in his heart he has agreed to abandon the bad traits and passed his spirits through the purifying water of good traits he becomes purified." [11:12]. Mending bad characteristics is like moving from ritual impurity to purity, and total commitment within a person's heart is sufficient to accomplish this. And that is why the Rambam writes that the night before the person was hated and today he is beloved, even though the change from last night to today takes place in a brief moment. That is why the Rambam emphasizes that in repentance for bad traits "If you repent, you will cling to Me" [7:6]. As is well known, the sages explained the concept of clinging to G-d as imitating His actions.

It would not be far from the truth to say that even though all year round the way to observe the mitzva of repentance is to stop doing bad deeds, Yom Kippur is different, since it is written, "You will be purified before G-d," and on this day we are required to improve our character traits.

RABBI YISROEL CINER

Parsha Insights

This Shabbos, being Shabbos Yom Kippur, we will not read the regular weekly parsha. Deviating from my regular format I would like to discuss the concept of t'shuva-return-and its connection to Yom Kippur.

Chaza"l teach us that t'shuva reaches up to the 'Kisay Hakavod', the throne of Hashem's glory. What is meant by this throne? We've mentioned that the Hebrew word for world is 'olam'. Olam also means hidden. The definition of the world is therefore, the place wherein Hashem conceals Himself. In spite of this concealment, Hashem's glory must be honored and upheld. The Siftei Chaim explains that the throne refers to this task of upholding the honor of Hashem.

Who has the job of bringing this honor to Hashem? Chaza"l reveal to us that the neshamos (souls) of Klal Yisroel are taken from beneath this throne. The Kisay Hakavod is held up by and comprised of the neshamos of Klal Yisroel. This means that Klal

Yisroel has the task of building the Kisay Hakavod. Every member of Klal Yisroel has a unique role in revealing this 'kavod shamayim', this honor of heaven, in this world. As one develops in belief and understanding of Hashem and subsequently is able to serve Hashem on a higher level, he/she merits to contribute his/her portion to this Kisay Hakavod.

T'shuva means to return. Return to where? When one steals there is an obligation to return the object. Where must one return it to? Back to its source- to the place from where it was taken! T'shuva therefore means returning back to our source! Our origin was beneath the Kisay Hakavod. T'shuva is returning ourselves and our focus to the very purpose of our creation- the building of kavod shamayim in this world. Honoring His will is our way of honoring Him-enabling His presence to dwell and be felt in this world.

In order to enable the neshama to 'return' to its source, Hashem created it with a strong craving to spiritually ascend and draw close to Him. A person feels a void, a hunger, a feeling that there is something more to life than the mundane. The physical body, with its physical wants and aspirations, misleads the person into thinking that materialistic pleasures will fill this void and satisfy this hunger. When one has one hundred, he suddenly discerns a desire for two hundred. Upon realizing that wealth doesn't fill the void, other pleasures are pursued. The only guarantee is a lack of true gratification. Salt water never quenches thirst. The spiritual hunger of the neshama can never be satiated by a steak. All of the pleasures of this world have no allure for a neshama which has tasted the spiritual ecstasy of closeness to Hashem. It thirsts for that connection and nothing else will satisfy it. Only through recognizing and trying to fulfill its true want and need will a person have a genuine satisfaction and sense of fulfillment.

Let's understand the connection between Yom Kippur and this t'shuva...

The Sefer Hachinuch writes that Hashem, with His compassion, designated one day a year to atone for the sins of those who do t'shuva. From the very start of creation this day was designated for this purpose.

"Va'y'hi erev va'y'hi boker yom echod-and it was evening, and it was morning, one day (Breishis 1:5)." The medrash explains that this 'one day' refers to Yom Kippur. The pasuk doesn't call it the first day, but rather one day.

The Ohr Gedalyahu explains that at that point of time, Hashem was alone in the world. There was perfect unity and oneness. Even the angels and the Satan were not created until the second day. From the time of their creation, the forces of evil were given the ability to appear as if they have power. On the first day, however, it was perfectly clear that Hashem alone rules and sustains the world and that there is no other source of power.

The numerical value of the name 'haSatan', the Satan, is 364. The gemara teaches us that, of the 365 days of the year, there are only 364 days where the Satan has the ability to mislead. His name, his essence, his ability, is restricted from one day a year. That day is Yom Kippur. The day where the state of the world during that first day of creation, the 'yom echod', is restored.

That is the day where we can focus ourselves on our source, our purpose. The day where we can clearly see the only path toward true fulfillment. The day where, by abstaining from the acts which nourish and empower the physical, we are able to see through the earthly wants to our true spiritual needs. The day that is designated for t'shuva-returning to who we truly are and realizing the potential of who we can be. The day of yom echod. Yom Kippur.

Good Shabbos and a g'mar chasima tova-a meaningful and uplifting Yom Kippur. © 2011 Rabbi Y. Cinter & torah.org

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

The normative approach to Yom Kippur is that it is a day set aside when we as individuals and as part of the larger community ask for forgiveness. Hence the term Yom Kippur which means the Day of Atonement.

It's not uncommon however, for Yom Kippur to be referred to as Yom Hakippurim-the day of Atonements. Why in the plural...why does the very term imply an atonement beyond that of the individual human being.

Some suggest that its in the plural because we seek not only our atonement but atonement for our beloved who have died. Others suggest that we seek atonement for ourselves as individuals and also for the community as a whole. A delightful tale offers an insightful idea.

One Yom Kippur a congregant of the father of the Hasidic movement Rabbi Yisrael Baal Shem Tov entered into the synagogue, prayed for several moments and left.

The rabbi was stunned. The congregant was well known in the community and had finished his prayers in such haste. "Why," the rabbi asked him, "were you so quick?"

"I'll tell you," the man replied. "I felt that the prayer I offered connected to G-d. I sensed deep inside that G-d had heard my requests."

"What did you say," the Baal Shem Tov asked, "What did you say that made you believe G-d listened?"

"I admitted before the Holy One, blessed, be He, all my sins. I indicated that there were days that I missed prayer, and yes, as a butcher there were times I was not honest in measurements. Looking up to the Ark I said to G-d, "I'll make a deal with you. If you forgive

me, I'll forgive you for all the pain that too often suffuses the world."

The Baal Shem Tov looked at the man, embraced him and said. "Naarische kind - foolish child, you had G-d by the coattails. You could have asked him to forgive the entire Jewish people, indeed the entire world."

Thus, Yom Kippur is Yom HaKippurim in the plural. It is a day when we are in search of G-d, even as it is a day when G-d is in search of us.

And it is a day when we seek forgiveness of G-d and G-d seeks forgiveness of us. © 2011 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA. Rabbi Avi Weiss is Founder and President of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah Rabbinical School - the Modern and Open Orthodox Rabbinical School. He is Senior Rabbi at the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale, a Modern and Open Orthodox congregation of 850 families. He is also National President of AMCHA - the Coalition for Jewish Concerns.

RABBI SHLOMO RESSLER

Weekly Dvar

Rabbi Abba (the scribe of the Zohar) once sat at the gateway of the Town of Lud, where he saw a traveler sit down on a pile of rocks at the edge of a mountain overlooking a cliff. The man was exhausted for his journey and immediately fell asleep. R. Abba watched this innocuous scene for a bit until to his dismay he watched as a deadly snake slithered out of the rocks making its way towards to the sleeping man. [R. Abba, who for some reason was immobilized and transfixed by this unfolding drama,] suddenly watched as a new turn of events happened. A giant lizard jumped out between the rocks and killed the serpent. R. Abba continued watching and saw that the man stood up and was perplexed to see a beheaded snake lying in front of him. He quickly gathered his possessions and rose to continue his journey. At that instant the pile of rocks he was sitting on collapsed and fell into the ravine below. The man was about to wander off when R. Abba ran after him and recounted everything he had witnessed. R. Abba asked the man, "My friend to what do you attribute all these miracles that just transpired?"

The traveler at first did not want to be bothered but felt the sincerity of R. Abba's question and confided in him. "1) Throughout my life I have never let a person harm me, and where I did not pacify him; 2) Never have I gone to sleep without forgiving someone for hurting me in any way; 3) Anyone who would hurt me would I endeavor, with all my heart, to resolve whatever animosity was between us; 4) And lastly, I would go out of my way to perform acts of kindness for the person involved in the misunderstanding." When R. Abba heard this he burst into tears. This person's actions were greater than Joseph, for Joseph had to deal with his brothers, who he was certainly going to forgive,

while this man forgives anyone and everyone who has harmed him.

It's up to us to forgive others, passively and actively, so that we may merit forgiveness of our own, and a prosperous and successful year to come! © 2011 Rabbi S. Ressler & LeLamed, Inc.

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

The "one day" of the year is now upon us. Yom Kippur carries with it a fascination for all concerned. The concept of forgiveness, that transgressions can be forgiven, that words can be retracted and that actions and commitments can somehow be annulled is a most radical one. For after all, in our real world of mundane life we remember yet every slight and insult hurled against us even decades later. We may be able to move on from that experience but we remember it.

But Yom Kippur creates a situation that spiritually erases the experience. It allows for a clean slate unfettered by past transgressions and failures. This makes Yom Kippur the greatest gift that Heaven can provide for us while we are alive. This concept of forgiveness and starting again is in turn one of the greatest of the many gifts that Judaism has granted to humankind but, there are few gifts in life that do not also carry with it obligations and responsibilities.

Forgiveness on Yom Kippur comes with the requirement of introspection and resolve to do better and not to continue to repeat the errors of the past. In the listing of the sins that we recite in the Yom Kippur prayers emphasis is placed upon the words that we have uttered, the legs that carried us to transgression and the hands that are usually the culprit in our actual sinning.

The listing of these body parts, so to speak, is not done unintentionally or merely poetically or metaphorically. They describe for us the areas of our lives that demand constant improvement and care. As such they deserve a modicum of study and understanding.

Life and death depend on one's speech. It is difficult many times to be truly careful in speaking to others or most often about others. We often truly believe that talk is cheap. Yet talk can be very damaging. The rabbis stated that there are three victims of bad speech or even of careless speech. They are the speaker, the listener and the person that that was the subject of the remark or the speech.

Bad speech is thus a serial killer, a multiple murderer. We all misspeak at times, most of the time unintentionally, but nevertheless consequences follow. As one whose profession is to constantly speak and teach I am well aware of how easily statements can be made that are not completely accurate and many times not wise at all. I truly regret those misspoken words.

That is the hazard of my profession but it is a hazard for all of us as well. Care in speaking is a commitment that should be at the top of our list of improvements that we pledge to ourselves on Yom Kippur. And in many respects it is probably the most difficult commitment to achieve. We are accustomed to speaking from our infancy so we do so almost out of rote. I once saw a sign that said: "Do not engage mouth unless brain is in gear." Truer words were never written or expressed.

Our legs move quickly when we are enthusiastic about where we are heading. King David said about himself that his legs almost automatically took him to the house of Torah prayer and study. Our legs carry us where we really want to go to. Thus they are a true measure of our goals and ambitions. They tell us what is important in our lives and what we truly value and prioritize. Our legs and where they carry us do not allow ourselves to be fooled by pious platitudes that we may sometimes utter.

There are times that we go places where we should not attend and participate in activities that are improper. Our legs brought us there and thus they revealed to us our true intent and uncovered weaknesses that we prefer to deny exist within us. How careful and measured our steps in life must be!

Yom Kippur also teaches us to guard our hands from doing wrongs. In haste and frustration we strike out at those that we feel have harmed or insulted us. The arch enemies of Moshe and the prototypes of evil men in the Torah, Datan and Aviram, are introduced to us in the Torah as two people striking each other. Unfortunately we live in a climate of violence, from the school yard, to the parking lot, to everyday life and domestic abuse. Basically Yom Kippur teaches us to maintain silence except where it is necessary to speak, walk slowly and in the right direction and to keep our hands to ourselves in almost all life circumstances.

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RABBI YONASON GOLDSON

Into the Void

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You can't be too careful these days. Or so it would seem, based upon the warning labels that are turning up more and more frequently on common, household products. A few examples: For external use only - On a curling iron. Do not use in shower - On a hair dryer. Do not drive with sunshield in place - On a cardboard screen that keeps sunlight off the dashboard. May irritate eyes - On a can of self-defense pepper spray. Remember, objects in the mirror are actually behind you - On a rear-view mirror. Caution: Remove infant before folding for storage - On a baby stroller.

Warning: May cause drowsiness - On a bottle of sleeping pills. Caution: Do not use near power lines - On a toilet plunger. Do not use as an ice cream topping - On a tube of hair coloring. Warning: do not attempt to swallow - On a mattress.

What does it tell us about ourselves that we have to be told the painfully obvious? Where are we headed when the victory of common sense over monstrous stupidity can no longer be taken for granted?

On the other hand, the obvious sometimes does surprise us by proving less than obvious. So I learned a number of years ago when visiting a new children's park with my oldest child.

My eighteen-month-old daughter showed no fear as she ascended the six-foot high ladder to the top of the slide. Never an especially nervous father, I stood calmly beside her, a model of parental responsibility although little concerned for her safety. After all, what could happen?

What could happen, indeed?

As my daughter reached the top of the ladder, she stepped boldly onto the crest of the slide and fearlessly peered down the long slope before her. And then, instead of dropping onto her derriere and sliding down in the conventional manner, she let out a shriek of delight and leapt over the hand rail and into the void.

Possessing reasonably good reflexes, I reacted instinctively and caught her in mid air. Barely had I set her feet back on the earth when, with a mischievous laugh, she raced up the ladder again. This time, however, I was ready. I stopped her as she reached the top, explained the proper method of descent, instructed her to slide down properly, then let her go.

And she went... once again leaping over the hand rail and into my arms.

I don't remember whether I ever did convince my daughter to use the slide correctly that day. But I do remember the absolute and unadulterated trust with which she threw herself into space knowing that I would catch her.

If only they could stay toddlers forever.

As adults, we find it a lot harder to trust a lot less. Marriage counselors sometimes employ a device commonly used by improvisation troupes: the "trust fall." What performers on a stage intuitively understand - and what partners in a family often have to learn - is that no partnership succeeds unless each party has confidence in the other. To establish trust (or to determine whether trust exists), Person A stands in front of Person B and falls straight back, trusting that Person B will not let Person A fall into a possible brain concussion. Often, it takes many tries before one party or the other is able to complete the exercise by keeping both feet together. Life teaches us to look after ourselves, and the habits of experience are not easily unlearned.

In contrast, little children have no illusions of their own self-sufficiency. They know they need their parents, and their confidence in us is pristine. Only with

time and experience do they acquire doubt and skepticism.

That's when parenting becomes a real challenge. Just as most parents calmly and lovingly instruct children who are too young to think for themselves, similarly does the wise parent grit his teeth and - with a smile whenever possible - state the obvious to older children who have become too impulsive or stubborn to think at all:

Wear your helmet.

Swallow before you talk.

Do your laundry before you run out of clothes.

Don't jump off the roof.

Don't text while driving... or in class... or at the dinner table... or when I'm talking to you.

And because our teenagers have lost the trust that came to them so naturally when they were younger, we repeat ourselves again and again and again.

Not surprisingly, our Father in Heaven does exactly the same thing. Included in the Torah we find a large body of laws called mishpatim, often translated as "statutes." In contrast to laws of religious ritual (and those so arcane that they seem to defy human logic), the mishpatim govern human interaction according to principles and values that any society would likely enact on its own for the benefit of its citizenry.

Don't murder.

Don't steal.

Don't commit adultery.

Don't bear false witness.

Do not mistreat the widow or the orphan.

These are only a few examples from long list of detailed regulations governing individual responsibility toward the personal and property of one's neighbor, together with a legal system that seeks to ensure civil justice.

Which brings us back to our original question about the obvious: if these mishpatim are laws we would have thought of and instituted on our own, why did the Almighty have to command us to do them? And why do we have to review them in the weekly Torah portions we read year after year?

Ultimately, it all comes down to trust.

Why do our children trust us implicitly when they are young? Simply because they have never found any reason not to. We feed them, clean them, protect them, and entertain them, thereby providing them with a sense of love and safety. Because they suffer from no illusions that they are able to look after themselves, they contentedly accept us in our role as guardians of their welfare.

As they begin to mature, however, their world takes on a different complexion, becoming a place of not only exploration but of self-assertion. The more children experience their own sense of individual identity, the more they seek to establish their own independence. They want to establish themselves as autonomous and self-reliant by drawing their own

boundaries and making their own rules. At the same time, they are terrified of the responsibilities of independence. Predictably, they blame us for the tension that seems to be pulling them apart.

When that happens, we, their parents, change from protectors to jailors, from guardians to tyrants. And they, our children, want nothing more than to break free. It is the end of trust, the end of innocence.

And so it is in our own relationship with the Almighty. We are His children, but He has created us each with an independent will, so that we struggle to unshackle ourselves from His authority and prove that we are up to the task of living as free people. Obsessed with asserting our own psychological and moral autonomy, we question every axiom, challenge every rule, and push every limit to the breaking point, until even the most obvious philosophical truisms start to seem quaint, or archaic, or irrational.

But alongside our irrepressible egos there remains within us some remnant of the child we once were, the child who laughed and played and found joy in every moment of existence because the world was a place of unquestionable security. And just as our children gradually recover from the insanity of adolescence and begin to recapture respect for their parents' wisdom and devotion, so too can we approach the ancient traditions of our people with new appreciation once we are willing to surrender the illusion that we are masters of our fate and concede that all we truly control is the inclination of our hearts.

It is not a leap of faith. It's a leap of trust.

It's a leap of trust into the arms of the Creator of All, the One who brought the universe into being, the One who renews continuously His promise to our ancestors that He would never forsake their children, the One who has kept the Jewish people alive and vibrant throughout the rise and fall of countless empires and oppressors. It is a leap of trust into the hands of the Master of All, the One who revealed His will to our forebears at Sinai and brought us into our land, the One who loves us enough to chastise us when we become intoxicated with the freedom to disregard Him, the One who gives all His children everything they need, withholding from us that which we only think we need.

Finally, it is a leap of logic. Indeed, it makes perfect sense to acknowledge that the wisdom we recognize in the statutes that govern civil society testifies to the wisdom that sometimes eludes us in the laws of religious ritual and spiritual self-perfection, and that both were designed to serve our own ultimate best interest. And it makes perfect sense to study and review the laws again and again, perpetually gaining greater appreciation of their wisdom by fulfilling the command to toil in them by day and by night.

Just as it makes perfect sense to place our security in the hands of the One we know will never let us fall. © 2011 Rabbi Y. Goldson & jewishworldreview.com