

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

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.

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

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

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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 halakhah 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 5777 is kindly supported by the Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation in memory of Maurice and Vivienne Wohl z"l* © 2017 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and 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.

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RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

The sublime holiness of the day of Yom Kippur is ushered in by the declaration of the annullment of vows in the Kol Nidrei service. Obviously we do not want to appear before the



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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. ©2017 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

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RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

The central theme of Yom Kippur is teshuvah, 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. In contrast to what many may think, Yom Kippur has many 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, God 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 God gives us the opportunities we need to succeed."

The mystics understand teshuvah differently. For them, teshuvah, in its truest essence means "returning," to being righteous. But this begs the obvious question: 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 God 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 God 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 God 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." In this way, teshuvah is a

dialogue. On Yom Kippur we stand before a caring God who asks the question(s). We have to search into ourselves and offer the answer(s). A God of love seeks us out. As much as we are in search of God, God 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 God," 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 to 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 – may we repent, return, dialogue, and be blessed as individuals and as a nation. © 2017 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 MORDECHAI KAMENETZKY

Call to Arms

Yom Kippur, the ultimate day of repentance, has the Jewish nation simultaneously praying, fasting and asking for forgiveness. It begins with the somber, quiet, and melodious intonation of Kol Nidrei and ends with the entire congregation shouting Hashem hu HaElokim (G-d is the Al-Mighty) seven times after various requests of forgiveness. It seems that at the time when our strength is waning our greatest and loudest pleas are spent. Shouldn't we begin the day with the strong requests for forgiveness and save the subdued prayers for when our bodies are weak from hunger and our lips parched from lack of water?

Rav Eichenstein, the Ziditchover Rebbe, tells the following story:

One Friday, a man entered the study of the Tschortkover Rebbe with a request that was very common in those days.

"My son was drafted into the army," the man began. "However, we have a way out. On Sunday, we are going to a doctor who will falsely declare him unfit for service. This way he will be spared certain misery, perhaps even death in that terrible army. Rebbe," he asked, "I need your blessing that he evade the draft."

The Rebbe quietly told him that Shabbos was nearing and he could not concentrate on blessings. The

man should return to him on Friday evening after his tisch (ceremonious chasidic table).

The man did so. After most of the chasidim had left, the man repeated his request, almost verbatim. Again the Rebbe was non-committal. "Return to me after the morning service."

Unperturbed, the man noted that he would really like to resolve this matter before Sunday morning.

Shabbos morning, after services, the man approached the Rebbe again. Calmly he repeated the predicament. "Sunday morning I am going to a doctor who will falsely declare my son unfit for military service. Please pray that we will evade conscription." The Rebbe was not moved. Again, he deferred until the afternoon.

At the third Shabbos meal, the scene repeated again, precisely the way it had the previous three times. "I understand that you are leaving Sunday morning. Come back to me late Saturday night," said the Rebbe. "By then I will have an answer for you."

By this time, his Chasidim's curiosity was piqued. They had never seen their Rebbe so reluctant to mete a blessing, especially when it was one that would save a Jewish soul from the frightful Polish army.

Saturday night a large crowd gathered as the man approached with his request. Frustrated and disgruntled, the man, once again, repeated his story, almost verbatim, for the fifth time.

Immediately, the Rebbe sprung from his chair and began to shout. "What are you asking me? Why would one even try to evade the service of our wonderful country? How dare you ask me for a blessing of that sort? Your son would make a fine soldier for our country. I wish him the best of luck in the army!"

The man quickly scurried from the room and left town. The Chasidim stood shocked and bewildered. Never had they heard such an uncharacteristic outcry from the Rebbe.

"I will explain," said the Rebbe. "The man was a fraud. He had no son, and if he did, he wanted him in the army. He was sent by the government to test our loyalty. Thank G-d we passed the test."

"But, Rebbe!" cried the chasidim, "how did you know?"

"Simple," explained the Rebbe. "I watched the level of intensity. From the moment he met me until tonight there was no increase in intensity nor feeling of desperation with each request. The moment I heard his request tonight and it contained no more passion or desperation than his first request on Friday night, I knew he was a fraud."

We stand a whole entire day in prayer, and end with a ne'ilah prayer, after nearly 24 hours of pleading. The litmus test of our sincerity comes as the heavenly gates are being closed. As the sun begins to set, our pleas should intensify. That crescendo assures our

sincerity. It also should assure us a Happy & Healthy Sweet New Year. ©2013 Rabbi M. Kamenetzky & torah.org

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

After the Talmud (B'rachos 34b) tells us that a verse in Y'shayahu (57:19) teaches us that a smoothly recited prayer indicates that it was accepted, it digresses by quoting several statements Rabbi Chiya bar Abba made in the name of Rabbi Yochanan regarding the positive prophesies of our prophets. These statements were likely quoted here because they lead into a statement made by Rabbi Avahu which uses the same verse in Y'shayahu as a proof text; "in the place where Ba'alei T'shuva are standing, the completely righteous are not standing." Numerous approaches have been suggested to explain Rabbi Avahu's statement, with some assuming that the term "Ba'alei T'shuva" refers to individuals who have sinned and repented for their sins, while others assume it refers to those still in the process of repenting for their sins.

One of the more widely quoted/suggested approaches to explain how Rabbi Avahu could imply that those who have sinned are on a higher level (after repenting) than those who never sinned in the first place is based on Reish Lakish's statement (Yoma 86b) that repentance done to get closer to G-d (as opposed to repentance done to avoid His punishment), turns sins into "mitzvos." Therefore, after repentance, there is such an abundance of mitzvos that the Ba'al T'shuva is on a higher level than one who never sinned.

Obviously, this approach assumes the term "Ba'al T'shuva" refers to an individual who has completed the t'shuva process, as otherwise the sins would not yet be considered "mitzvos." However, there are several issues with this approach. For one thing, it assumes that those who repent had committed more sins than the amount of mitzvos done by the completely righteous (or they wouldn't end up with more mitzvos), which is a very difficult assumption to make. After all, if the completely righteous person was studying Torah whenever he could, it would take a really, really wicked person to commit so many sins that they would surpass the mitzvos being racked up for each word of Torah learned. And if the righteous person wasn't studying Torah whenever he could, he would need to do his own t'shuva for the "bitul Torah" he committed, and wouldn't be considered "completely righteous." Additionally, repentance is needed for even one sin; how could Rabbi Avahu make a blanket statement that "Ba'alei T'shuva" are on a higher level if some "only" need to repent from a few sins? And since it is only those who repent in order to get closer to G-d whose sins become "mitzvos," what about those Ba'alei T'shuva who repented because they were afraid of the consequences of their sins? Isn't Rabbi Avahu's

statement misleading if it only applies to one category of Ba'alei T'shuva?

Chiddushay G'onim (Sanhedrin 99a) quotes Akeidas Yitzchok (Gate #97), who compares the spiritual ailment of sinning to being physically sick. If the normal cycle of illness includes aches and pains followed by a severe illness, and when returning to being healthy the severity lessens but the aches and pains return, the stage of having aches and pains is a bad thing for someone who is healthy, but a good thing for someone recovering from illness. Similarly, he continues, since it is impossible to jump from being a habitual sinner to being completely righteous, there are stages in-between that are a good place for the sinner to be (as it is on the road to recovery) but a bad place for a righteous person to be (as it means no longer being righteous). The example given is a "bamah," an altar outside the Temple, which is forbidden even if it is used to bring offerings to G-d. Nevertheless, for an idol-worshipper, bringing offerings to G-d on an outlawed altar is a step in the right direction; a step that would be highly problematic for anyone who had been bringing his offerings to G-d in the Temple. This, it is suggested, is what Rabbi Avahu meant when he said that "in the place where Ba'alei T'shuva are standing the completely righteous do not stand," as there are "places" that are appropriate for the Ba'alei T'shuva but highly inappropriate for the completely righteous.

Obviously, if such "places" are only appropriate when recovering from sin, but inappropriate if there is no [longer a] need to recover from it, the term "Ba'alei T'shuva" must refer to those who are still in the process of repenting, not those who have completed the process. Last week (<http://tinyurl.com/lj9d8nt>), I presented several arguments making the case that this is what the term means, and that the term "Tzadikim G'murim" (the completely righteous) refers not only to those who have never sinned, but also to those who had sinned and completed the process of repentance. For example, a "ba'al ga'avah" refers to someone who is currently haughty, not someone who has become a master over his haughtiness and is now humble. Similarly, a "Ba'al T'shuva" must refer to someone who is still repenting, not someone who has already "mastered" his repentance. However, the context of how the Talmud quotes Rabbi Avahu's statement presents a powerful argument against this.

After Rabbi Chiya bar Abba quoted Rabbi Yochanan saying that all of the "good" prophesies apply to Ba'alei T'shuva, as what await the completely righteous is indescribable, the Talmud says that this statement is incompatible with Rabbi Avahu's (who statement is then quoted). If Rabbi Yochanan was saying that the completely righteous are on a higher level than Ba'alei T'shuva (which seems to be the case) and Rabbi Avahu was saying that Ba'alei T'shuva are on a higher level, the incompatibility of these two

statements is obvious. But if Rabbi Avahu just meant that there are advantages the Ba'al T'shuva has during the t'shuva process, whether those advantages are being able to do things a righteous person shouldn't or the positive outcomes of having to work harder to overcome sin, his statement would not necessarily be incompatible with the notion that, overall, the completely righteous deserve a greater reward than those who have not yet successfully completed the t'shuva process.

The Talmud (M'nachos 29b), referencing B'reishis 2:4 (see also 5:2), says that G-d created this world using the letter "hei" because it has a large opening on the bottom which allows anyone who wants to leave (by sinning) to easily escape, and a small opening above it's left leg so that if they want to repent, they can enter via that opening. Re-entering through the same opening on the bottom won't work, the Talmud says (likely because it would be too easy to fall back out), and re-entering via the higher opening, which takes much effort (by repenting), only works because G-d helps those returning to Him. Tomar D'vorah (1:7) says that this is what Rabbi Avahu was referring to when he said that the completely righteous do not stand in the same place as Ba'alei T'shuva (needing to use the higher, smaller opening, although in the interest of full disclosure, he seems to understand the term "Ba'al T'shuva" to refer to those whose repentance is complete). This is consistent with how Rabbi Avahu understands the verse in Y'shayahu, as G-d is "closer" to the one trying to repent because He "helps" the sinner overcome his mistake, whereas the completely righteous do not need such help. [Incidentally, once repentance has been achieved, and, with G-d's help, the former sinner is able to re-enter the "hei," he is now in the same place as the person who never left (i.e. never sinned); both are now considered "completely righteous."]

Rabbi Yochanan, on the other hand, understands the one who is "closer" to G-d to be the one who is farther from sin. It would seem, according to him, that even though the sinner needs divine help in order to repent, G-d is still closer to the person who never sinned (or has fully recovered from sin) than with the sinner He is helping. [It would be difficult to say that Rabbi Yochanan understands the term "Ba'al T'shuva" as referring to one who has completed his repentance, as if he did, his response to Rabbi Avahu's proof text should have been that the verse only applies before repentance is complete, when the sinner needs the extra help, whereas his statement refers to afterwards, when such help is no longer needed.]

The prophecies refer to "the days of Moshiach" (as one of the other statements of Rabbi Yochanan attests), not to "the world to come." Rambam (Hilchos T'shuva 9:1-2) tells us that the reward for keeping the Torah is given in the next world, not this one, and any

"good" bestowed upon us in this world is designed to help us continue to keep the Torah (and be more successful at doing so). If G-d bestows good upon us to help us do a better job keeping His Torah, and G-d is closer with those trying to repent than with those who are completely righteous, we would expect more "goodness" to be bestowed upon Ba'alei T'shuva than on Tzadikim G'murim. Yet, Rabbi Yochanan says that the good described in the prophecies applies to Ba'alei T'shuva, as the good that will be experienced by Tzadikim G'murim is indescribable. This, the Talmud tells us, is incompatible with Rabbi Avahu's statement, since according to Rabbi Avahu, G-d is closer to Ba'alei T'shuva (as He is helping them repent), and He would bestow at least as much good upon them as He does for Tzadikim G'murim. © 2014 Rabbi D. Kramer

RABBI SHLOMO RESSLER

Weekly Dvar

A little girl and her father were crossing a flimsy bridge. The father was scared so he asked his little daughter: "Sweetheart, please hold my hand so that you don't fall into the river." The little girl said, "No, Dad. You hold my hand." "What's the difference?" asked the puzzled father. "There is a big difference," replied the little girl. "Dad, if I hold your hand and something happens to me, chances are that I may let your hand go. But, if you hold my hand, I know for sure that no matter what happens, you will never let go."

On Yom Kippur we remember that Hashem (G-d) loves us with an infinite and unconditional love, and is waiting to hear our prayers. Just as a parent will always yearn for a child to return, G-d is there to offer us a stabilizing hand to help us navigate the flimsy bridge of life. © 2014 Rabbi S. Ressler & LeLamed, Inc.

RABBI YISROEL CINER

Parsha Insights

The days which stretch from Rosh Hashanah through Yom Kippur are known as the 'Aseres Y'may Tshuva' -- the Ten Days of Repentance. As difficult as it is to shake ourselves from the stupor of our set patterns and ways, we need to try to find some concrete way of improving ourselves during these crucial days.

Thankfully, Chaza"l discuss a beautiful concept -- one that can be worked into our daily dealings -- and teach that it has the capacity to cause Hashem to 'pass by' our sins and shortcomings. The Siftei Chaim explains it in the following way.

The Talmud [Rosh Hashana 17A] teaches: Rava said: One who is maavir {passes by} his middos {attributes}, his sins are also 'passed by.'

Rav Dessler explains that this concept of 'maavir' is analogous to a road being almost totally blocked but one can still pass by. One who hasn't completely eradicated a bad middah but has minimized

it to the degree that he can get past it. Anger is the usual response when wronged. If that anger totally fills the person he will be unable to get past it -- to understand the other side and give the benefit of the doubt. If, however, he is able to hold that anger in check and minimize it to the degree that he can get past it, he will be able to understand the other side and forgive the perpetrator.

When one treats others in such a fashion, Hashem's attribute of middah k'negged middah {reciprocity} dictates that His judgment will also be minimized. Hashem will 'get past' that person's sins and will judge with chessed {kind mercy}.

This will not only affect a person's station in the World to Come but will even nullify harsh decrees aimed at a person in this world. The Talmud there relates that Rav Huna was so ill he was on the verge of death. After he had fought off death and was once again well, he related what he had experienced. "The heavenly court had decreed death but Hashem intervened arguing that since I had been maavir on my middos, the court must also look past some of my actions."

A person actually has the capacity to dictate how he'll be judged by the heavens. Two people can perform identical deeds and yet be judged totally differently. One who was maavir and found the good in others will have his sins mitigated and his merits magnified. The second, who refused to cut others some slack, will have his actions meticulously scrutinized and unceremoniously rejected unless they were completely pure. This is not necessarily a punishment. It is simply a reflection of the person himself.

With this, the Chofetz Chaim explains a seemingly difficult passage in the 'Avinu Malkainu' prayers that are recited during these days. We implore our Father and King to inscribe us in the Book of Merits. Why do we need to ask Hashem to do this? If we have merits then we should automatically be inscribed. If we don't have such merits, then even asking to be inscribed in that book should be considered quite audacious!

He explains that every person has performed some good deeds and as such has merits. However, close scrutiny of these deeds may leave nothing more than a bare skeleton of the original act. We might have donated charity to a needy cause but our feelings of pride, guilt and honor might not leave much of a balance. It might no longer deserve to be inscribed in that heavenly Book of Merits. As such, we implore Hashem not to dissect our actions too thoroughly. If we did a good deed, inscribe it in the Book of Merits.

The way that we can push that decision to go in our favor is, of course, through middah k'negged middah {the attribute of reciprocity}. If we accept the good that others do for us at face value without overly analyzing it, if we are willing to get past the less savory

aspects of other's deeds, then middah k'negged middah will dictate that we and our deeds will be inscribed in the Book of Merits.

It all depends on how we look at things...

The great Chassidic leader, Rav Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev, once witnessed a seemingly boorish sight. A simple wagon-driver, in the midst of his prayers, began greasing the axle of his wagon. Other shocked bystanders couldn't help but commenting on the crudeness they had witnessed. "Imagine a person greasing an axle while praying!" they cried out in dismay.

Rav Levi Yitzchak, whose love for Israel seeped out of his every pore, had a totally different slant on the situation. "Imagine such a Jew!" he excitedly exclaimed. "He even prays when he greases his axle!"

A g'mar chasima tova. May we all be inscribed and sealed in the Book of Merits and the Book of Life.
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RABBI KALMAN PACKOUZ

Shabbat Shalom Weekly

The Torah tells us in Leviticus 23:40 a special commandment for Sukkot -- to take the arbah minim, the Four Species (etrog, lulav, hadassim, and aravot). We wave them in the four directions of the compass as well as up and down. The symbolism of the waving in all directions is to remind us that G-d is everywhere. However, why are these four species designated for the mitzvah?

Our rabbis teach that these four species are symbolic of four types of Jews: the etrog (citron) which has a fragrance and a taste represents those Jews who have both Torah wisdom and good deeds; the lulav (date palm branch) which has a taste (from the dates), but no fragrance represents those Jews who have Torah wisdom, but no good deeds; the hadassim (myrtle branches) have a fragrance, but no taste representing those Jews who have good deeds, but no Torah wisdom; and lastly, the aravot (willow branches) have neither a taste nor a smell representing those Jews who are lacking in Torah wisdom and good deeds.

What do we do on Sukkot? We symbolically bind together and recognize every Jew as an integral and important part of the Jewish people. If even one is missing, the mitzvah is incomplete. Our People is one; we must do all we can to bind together the Jewish people and work to strengthen the Jewish future! ©2014 Rabbi K. Packouz and aish.com

