

There Is No Sanctity Without Preparation: On The Torah Ethics Of Dating

Rabbi Dr. Jacob J. Schacter

Senior Scholar, Yeshiva University Center for the Jewish Future
University Professor of Jewish History and Thought, Yeshiva University

The days leading up to Shavuot, coming closer and closer to *kabbalat ha-Torah*, remind us of the power of preparation. Ever since the counting of the *omer* commenced on the second night of Pesach, the countdown continues as we look forward to celebrating this most monumental and powerful event in our national history.

The notion of preparation in the life of a Jew is central and is expressed in a number of different ways throughout the year. For example, in a *teshuvah drashah* Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik delivered thirty years ago, in 1976, the Rav reflected on his experience as a child on the day before Yom Kippur:

I remember how difficult it was to go to sleep on Erev Yom Kippur. The shoet used to come at the break of dawn to provide chickens for the kapparot ritual, and later the people would give charity. . . Minhah, Vidduy, the seudah ha-mafseket, [and] my grandfather's preparations all made Erev Yom Kippur a special entity, not only halakhic but emotional and religious as well. Erev Yom Kippur constitutes the herald that the Ribbono Shel Olam is coming, that "lifnei Hashem titharu, before Hashem you shall be purified."¹

It would appear, perhaps, that the Rav understood the word "*lifnei*" in this *pasuk* not only in a sense of place or geography, i.e., "purification takes place *in the presence of Hashem*" but also temporally, i.e., "purification takes place even *prior to* encountering Hashem," namely, beginning already on erev Yom Kippur.

¹ See Arnold Lustiger, *Before Hashem You Shall be Purified: Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik on the Days of Awe* (Edison, 1998), 60-61.

To understand the halakhic status of this unique day, we need to examine the one ritually mandated act most closely associated with it. The *Shulhan Arukh* (*Orah Hayyim* 604:1; based on *Berakhot* 8b, *Yoma* 81b, *Rosh Hashanah* 9a; *Pesahim* 68b) states that it is a *mitzvah* to eat on Erev Yom Kippur. The Rabbenu Yonah (*Sha'arei Teshuvah* 4:8-10) offers a number of rationales for this obligation. One explanation is that on all other *Yamim Tovim* we institute a festive meal as an expression of the “*simhat ha-mizvah*” that we feel. After all, Yom Kippur is also a *Yom Tov* (see *Ta'anit* 26b) but, since eating on the day of Yom Kippur itself is prohibited, we express that joy the day before. Another explanation is that we eat on Erev Yom Kippur to give us the strength to engage in the activities of prayer, supplication and *teshuvah* mandated on the next day when we will be fasting.

There seems to be a fundamental difference between these two explanations that reflects on the core essence of the day of Erev Yom Kippur. According to the first, Erev Yom Kippur has a *din* of Yom Kippur, it is an extension of Yom Kippur, it fulfills the role of Yom Kippur with regard to the *mizvah* of eating on a Yom Tov. It serves as the part of “Yom Kippur” when food is permitted. According to the second, however, Erev Yom Kippur is not an extension of the day of Yom Kippur but is, rather, a preparation for Yom Kippur. We eat on that day purely to enable us properly to acquit ourselves on the more important day that will follow. This point of view is also reflected in Rashi (on *Yoma* 81b, s.v. *kol ha-okhel*) and in the Rosh (*Yoma* 8:22).

There is a long list of halakhic distinctions that may possibly depend on this conceptual analysis. For example: is this *mizvah de-orayta* or *de-rabbanan*?; what and how much must one eat to fulfill the obligation?; does the obligation begin the night before or only in the morning?; what if one knows that he will fast well on Yom Kippur without eating the day before?; and are women also included in this obligation? A growing literature addresses these issues – and others – and is worth careful study.²

This notion of preparation is clearly central before the Yamim Noraim, as it is before Shavuot. What are we doing to insure that we maximize the opportunity granted us by Hodesh Elul, Rosh Hashanah, the Aseret Yemei Teshuvah and Yom Kippur? We will benefit from them all only to the extent that we have prepared ourselves in advance to do so.

The centrality of this idea is also expressed in a very interesting statement of Rabbi Yehudah Aryeh Leib of Gur, the author of the *Sefat Emet* on Humash, in the context of the *yom tov* of Sukkot.. The *Tur* (*Orah Hayyim* 581) quotes a Midrash that states that the phrase “*ba-yom ha-rishon*” found in the Torah in the context of the first day of Sukkot (*Vayikra* 23:40) includes the fact that that day is “*rishon le-heshbon avonot*,” the first day in the accounting of sins. After all, we are engaged in performing *mizvot* from the first day of Rosh Hashanah until that point: doing *teshuvah* during the Aseret Yemei Teshuvah and preparing for the holiday of Sukkot from Mozaei Yom Kippur until its arrival. But, asks the *Taz* (*Orah Hayyim* 581:beginning), after all,

² See, for example, R. Aharon Kahn, “Kol ha-Okhel ve-Shoteh be-Teshi'i,” *Bet Yosef Shaul* 2, pp. 40-85; R. Yizhak Mirsky, *Hegvonei Halakhah* (Jerusalem, 1989), 178-83; R. Shlomo Weisblit, “Al Mizvat Akhilah u-Shetiyah Merubah be-Erev Yom ha-Kippurim, Iyyun be-Aggadah u-be-Halakhah,” *Mehkerei Hag* 11, pp. 52-60; R. Matityahu Blum, *Sefer Torah la-Da'at al ha-Mo'adim* (New York, 1985), 36-39; R. Zevi Pesah Frank, *Mikraei Kodesh: Yamim Nora'im* (Jerusalem, 1996), 125-27; R. Eliyahu Slesinger, *Eleh Hem Mo'adai* (Jerusalem, 1999), 298-305.

on the first day of Sukkot one performs the very *mizvot* for which one was only preparing until then so why is the time spent on the preparation more sanctified than the time actually doing the *mizvah*? In response, the *Sefat Emet* (Ha'azinu 5634) asserts for two reasons that this is precisely the case: “*yoter koah ve-hazalah yesh be-hakhanat ha-mizvah mi-guf kiyyum ha-mizvah.*”³ The power of preparation for a *mizvah* is profound, even more profound than the power of the performance of the *mizvah* itself.

One final example of the power of preparation is a comment of the Rav about Erev Shabbat Jews:

*True, there are Jews in America who observe the Sabbath. . . . But, it is not for the Sabbath that my heart aches, it is for the forgotten “eve of the Sabbath.” There are Sabbath-observing Jews in America, but there are not “eve-of-the-Sabbath” Jews who go out to greet the Sabbath with beating hearts, with their feet or with their mouths.*⁴

Observing the Shabbat is one thing; preparing to observe the Shabbat is something else entirely.

This notion applies in so many areas of our religious lives and it must also be central in the dating lives of young men and women as they are engaged in the search for a life's partner. Marriage represents a life lived in sanctity and, as a result, it too requires appropriate, thoughtful and sensitive preparation. I present here a small and by no means exhaustive list of what I have in mind. Most apply to the young man as well as to the young woman; some apply only to the young man.

- When you received a call from someone with a suggestion for a date, did you respond in a timely and respectful way to say either that you are interested in finding out more about the person in question or that you are busy now and may consider the suggestion at a future time?
- What kinds of questions did you ask about that person? Were they the most appropriate ones? Did you focus on internal, longer lasting, aspects or on external ones which can – and will – change more easily?
- How much time elapsed from the time you agreed to the date until you made the call?
- Were you respectful to the other person during the telephone call setting up the date?
- Were you dressed properly for the date?
- Did you devote time to plan where you will take the young lady?
- Did you clear your schedule and select a time when you can focus on your date and not appear rushed?
- Did you bring along enough money to offer your date something nice to eat?
- Did you pick up your date on time?
- Were you ready at the designated time or did you have the young man wait for you?
- Did you speak to your date's parents with graciousness and respect?

³ For more on the role of *hakhanah* in the Torah of Ger, see R. Hayyim Yeshayahu Hadari, “Hag La-Hashem Mahar,” in *Ishei Mo'ed* (Jerusalem, 1984), 65f.

⁴ Pinchas Peli, ed., *On Repentance* (Northvale and London, 1996), 88.

- Did you arrange for transportation, parking, etc.?
- Did you spend a respectable amount of time with your date, even if you may have felt early on that he or she was not for you?
- If an intermediary was involved, did you call back in a timely manner and let him or her know whether or not you want to go out again?
- If your relationship has progressed and you feel at a later point that you want to end the relationship, did you part ways with respect and sensitivity?
- What did you say about the other person to your friends and others after you broke up?
- Did you make an effort to suggest someone else more suitable as a possible match for this individual?
- Whether the date results in an engagement or not, did you express *hakarat ha-tov* for those who worked – often hard - to bring the two of you together?

Each of these questions – and there are more – focus on the interpersonal skills necessary for a meaningful relationship. They seem to be self-evident and obvious but need to be the focus of constant attention. We want our marriages to be blessed with thoughtfulness, respect, kindness, responsible behavior, expressions of gratitude, flexibility when necessary, and focus on the other. Such skills and such a focus need to begin at the beginning. Proper preparation for marriage will help insure more lasting, loving and meaningful relationships once *Hakadosh Barukh Hu* blesses us with the person with whom we will build our futures and share the rest of our lives.