

Yom Kippur: When Less is More

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Over the last decade, it has been a clarion call of various industries; from fashion to design, from financial models to the elegance of new technologies: "Less is More" has led many innovative efforts. Indeed, it seems, we have a similar message emerging from the values of Yom Kippur.

We learn that on this most solemn day of Yom Kippur we aspire to be angelic and that we attempt to achieve that elevated status by denying or limiting our physical needs. How are we to understand this credo of "Less is More" as a religious aspiration?

The *Avnei Nezer* alludes to this aspiration:

The prohibition of Yom Kippur stems from holiness ... Because of its holiness, a person is set apart from material things, and there is a removal of sin that results from material things ... On Yom Kippur, which is called "a holy day of God," material things are forbidden.

Avnei Nezer, CM no. 161

דאיסור יוהכ"פ משום קדושה הוא ... שמשום קדושתו שנבדל מן החומר יש סילוק החטא שבא מן החומר. ... וע"כ יוהכ"פ שנקרא קדוש ה' נאסרו בו דברים חומריים.

אבני נזר, חושן משפט ס' קסא

The implication here is that by separating ourselves from both essential and non-essential material aspects of daily living, we are enabling our inner spirituality and nurturing a more fertile ground for growth. The unique prohibitions associated with these material imitations are indeed rooted in the basic areas of pleasure and enjoyment of life. These are: 1. Eating and drinking 2. Bathing and washing 3. Wearing leather shoes 4. Using creams and salves 5. Sexual relations.

How can we understand the connection between these prohibitions and reaching a more elevated spiritual status? Are we to assume that the asceticism of deprivation enhances spirituality? That there is some form of positive power to pain and deprivation? Are we somehow less spiritually available in our daily non-denial states?

The Rambam reflects upon these prohibitions in his comments regarding the positive commandments relating to Yom Kippur:

There is an additional positive commandment on Yom Kippur, namely, to desist from eating and drinking, as the verse states: "You shall afflict your souls." [The Sages] learned by tradition: What affliction is there to the soul? This refers to fasting. ... They

מצות עשה אחרת יש ביום הכפורים והיא לשבות בו מאכילה ושתייה שנאמר תענו את נפשותיכם, מפי השמועה למדו ענוי שהוא לנפש זה הצום ... וכן למדנו מפי השמועה

also learned by tradition that one is forbidden on this day to wash or anoint oneself, to wear shoes, or to engage in sexual relations.

Rambam, Hilkhot Shevitat Asor 1:4-5

שֵׂאסוּר לְרַחוּץ בּוֹ אוֹ לְסוּךְ אוֹ לְנַעוּל
אֶת הַסַּנְדָּל אוֹ לְבַעוּל.
רמב"ם, הל' שביתת עשור א:ד-ה

In addition, we find another element to the prohibitions listed for Yom Kippur:

And you shall have on the tenth day of this seventh month **a holy gathering**; and you shall afflict your souls: you shall not do any work.

Bamidbar 29:7

וּבַעֲשׂוֹר לְחֻדֶּשׁ הַשְּׁבִיעִי הַזֶּה מִקְרָא־קֹדֶשׁ יִהְיֶה לָכֶם
וְעַנִּיתֶם אֶת־נַפְשֹׁתֵיכֶם כָּל־מְלָאכָה לֹא תַעֲשׂוּ.
במדבר כט:ז

How does the prohibition of work on Yom Kippur enhance our understanding of the elevated potential we can achieve on this holiday?

First, the prohibition against work on Yom Kippur places this day in the same category of Yom Tov. This is significant in that although Yom Kippur has wholly unique aspects, it is not entirely *sui generis* and may therefore be seen as sharing the same basic holiday qualities with the other major *chagim* of Judaism.

The Maharal (*Chiddushei Aggadot, Sh'vuot* 13a) sees this additional prohibition of work as connected to the change in status that Yom Kippur offers us, and is interestingly directly related to the connection between Yom Kippur and Yovel.¹ The Maharal explains that the relationship between Yom Kippur and Yovel emerges from the way each effectuated a critical change of status. Just as Yovel establishes the requirement to return all lands to their original owners on the jubilee year, the theme of return permeates Yom Kippur as well. In both cases we experience a return to the original source: for Yovel, it is slaves to their freedom and lands to their original owners, for Yom Kippur, each act of teshuva returns a person to God. The Maharal offers this set of parallel returns as a reminder that we have awaiting us a "purity of soul, that we left as a result of our transgressions."

It is noteworthy that the language for both Yom Kippur and Yovel invoke the language of Shabbat: Yom Kippur is termed "*Shabbat Shabbaton*, a Shabbat of absolute rest" (Vayikrah 16:31) and Yovel is also called Shabbat (Vayikrah 25:10).

In both cases we have a prohibition of forbidden work, one deriving from the honor accorded the holiday, and one rooted in forbidden agricultural activity during the jubilee year. On Shabbat, we acknowledge our gratitude for the benevolence of God and His bountiful world—we cease to create in order to highlight our gratitude for creation. On Yovel, by reversing the status of our acquisitions and transactions of the past half-century, we demonstrate an appreciation that with all the effort and initiative of a half century we are essentially dependent on God. On Yom Kippur, this theme emerges in the form of attempting to be angelic and thus divested from our material limitations. Our efforts, investments, initiatives and accomplishments of the year past are themselves too limited to be deserving. Thus, by removing a weekday and material focus from our Yom Kippur experience we express our recognition of how limited and

¹ The ideas relating to Maharal's connection between Yom Kippur and Yovel are based on an article by R. David Silverberg, Parashat Ha'azinu, available at www.vbm-torah.org/archive/salt-devarim/53-4haazinu.htm.

limiting that plane of existence is. Instead, Yom Kippur is suffused with the effort to remind ourselves of how much more we are than just a sum total of the necessary drives of human material existence. Like Shabbat and Yovel, Yom Kippur forces us to refocus the balance of our material and spiritual aspirations—on this day, in this way, "Less is More."

So while Yom Kippur holds first place for solemnity, and is the nearest to asceticism of all Jewish rituals, it also has a celebratory component as well. However, seeing this side of Yom Kippur can be challenging. Therefore, Chazal took great care to assure that we understood its celebratory nature and included Yom Kippur in their discussion of the celebratory laws of Yom Tov.

Rabbenu Yona writes:

On all other holidays, we establish meals in celebration of the commandment ... Owing to the fast that is observed on Yom Kippur [itself], we are obligated to partake of a festive meal on the day before Yom Kippur in celebration of the joy derived from the mitzva.

Sha'arei Teshuva 4:9

כי בשאר ימים טובים אנהנו
קובעים סעודה לשמחת המצוה ...
ומפני שהצום ביום הכפורים,
נתחייבו לקבוע סעודה על שמחת
המצוה בערב יום הכפורים.
שערי תשובה ד:ט

There are those who maintain that on Yom Kippur, in addition to the mitzva of honoring the day, there is also a mitzva of rejoicing, which certainly cannot coexist with grief and suffering. This is what follows from the words of Rav Achai Gaon, author of the *She'iltot*:

These days [Rosh ha-Shana and Yom Kippur], since rejoicing applies to them, they are considered like Festivals and [therefore] interrupt mourning.

She'iltot D'Rav Achai no. 15

הני כיון דאית בהו שמחה
כרגלים דמו ומפסיקין.
שאילתות דרב אחאי ס' טו

Rabbenu Yonatan, in his commentary on the Rif, writes about “the festive rejoicing of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur” (10b in Alfasi to *Eruvin*). A precise reading of Rambam also leads us to the same conclusion:

On Rosh ha-Shana and Yom Kippur, however, there is no Hallel, because they are days of repentance, fear and dread, not days of excessive rejoicing.

Rambam, Hilkhhot Chanuka 3:6

ראש השנה ויום הכפורים אין בהן הלל לפי
שהן ימי תשובה ויראה ופחד לא ימי שמחה
יתירה.
רמב"ם, הל' חנוכה ג:ו

Rambam explains that Hallel is not recited on Rosh ha-Shana and Yom Kippur because they are not days of “excessive rejoicing.” The implication is that on Rosh ha-Shana and Yom Kippur there is a modest and restrained rejoicing that expresses itself in a serious and solemn way. Clearly, however, according to Rambam, this is also regarded as rejoicing. For what do we rejoice? Is deprivation a source of joy?

The emphasis on Yom Kippur on elevating our spiritual worthiness is our source of joy and celebration. Indeed, this is indicated by looking at the list of prohibited activities with an eye toward these needs as being paused, at rest, and not in the driver's seat of our daily aspirations. Instead, we highlight our aspirations of spirit, of destiny and of relationships. These are achieved via a renewed devotion to teshuva and tefillah both on and before Yom Kippur.

It is noteworthy that the *teshuva* of pre-Yom Kippur is focused on interpersonal relationships, whereas the *teshuva* of Yom Kippur is primarily between man and God:

For sins between man and God Yom Kippur atones, but for sins between man and his fellow Yom Kippur does not atone until he appeases his fellow.

Mishnah, Yoma 85b

עבירות שבין אדם למקום יום הכפורים מכפר
עבירות שבין אדם לחבירו אין יום הכפורים
מכפר עד שירצה את חבירו.

משנה, יומא פה:

It seems as if Yom Kippur is an opportunity to improve our relationship with Hashem, as it is only this type of *teshuva* (*bein adam lamakom*) that is effectuated on Yom Kippur. All efforts to rectify our misdeeds toward others, our efforts to wipe clean our interpersonal sins, comes only from resolution directly with those we have wronged and must be actively pursued independently of the fast of Yom Kippur. On Yom Kippur our mitzvot, our tefillot and our emphases are all directed toward God—we approach God with one ultimate prayer: *Please see us as worthy of a renewed trust and faith—forgive us for our past deeds and find us worthy of a new effort, a new and renewed covenant.*

R. Avraham Danziger (1748-1820), author of the *Chayei Adam* (144), popularized the famous opening supplication of Yom Kippur, *Tefilla Zakka*. This unusual prayer, recited by individuals before Kol Nidrei, whispers of man's misuse of his God-given abilities; instead of using them for the service of God, he has used them for sin. The emotional apex of this prayer, which captures the motif of *Tefilla Zakka* reads:

I know that there is no one so righteous that they have not wronged another, financially or physically, through deed or speech. This pains my heart within me, because wrongs between humans and their fellow are not atoned by Yom Kippur until the wronged one is appeased. Because of this, my heart breaks within me, and my bones tremble; for even the day of death does not atone for such sins. Therefore, I prostrate and beg before You to have mercy on me and grant me grace, compassion, and mercy in Your eyes and in the eyes of all people. For behold, I forgive with a final and resolved forgiveness anyone who has wronged me, whether in person or property, even if they slandered me or spread falsehoods against me. So I release anyone who has injured me either in person or in property, or has committed any manner of sin that one may commit against another [except for legally enforceable business obligations, and except for someone who has deliberately harmed me with the thought "I can harm him because he will forgive me"]. Except for these two, I fully and finally forgive everyone; may no one be punished because of me. And just as I forgive everyone, so may You grant me grace in the eyes of others, that they too forgive me absolutely.

ולהיות שידעתי שכמעט אין צדיק בארץ
אשר לא יחטא בין אדם לחבירו בממון
או בגופו במעשה או בדבור פה. ועל זה
דוה לבי בקרבי כי על חטא שבין אדם
לחבירו אין יום הכפורים מכפר עד
שירצה את חבירו ועל זה נשבר לבי
בקרבי ורחפו עצמותי כי אפילו יום
המיתה אין מכפר ולכן אני מפיל תחנתי
לפניך שתרחם עלי ותתנני לחן לחסד
ולרחמים בעיניך ובעיני כל בני אדם
והנני מוחל במחילה גמורה לכל מי
שחטא נגדי בין בגופי ובין בממוני או
שדיבר עלי לשון הרע ואפילו הוצאת
שם רע וכן לכל מי שהזיק לי בגופי או
בממוני ולכל חטאות האדם אשר בין
אדם לחבירו חוץ מממון אשר אני יכול
להוציא על פי דין וחוץ מי שחוטא כנגדי
ואומר אחטא לו והוא ימחול לי וחוץ
מאלו אני מוחל במחילה גמורה ולא
יענש שום אדם בסבתי. וכשם שאני
מוחל לכל אדם כן תתן את חייני בעיני
כל אדם שימחלו לי במחילה גמורה.

Why is it customary to seek forgiveness of one's fellow specifically on the eve of Yom Kippur? On a simple level, appeasing one's fellow is necessary for a complete atonement. The *Tur*, however, cites *Pirkei De-Rabbi Eliezer*, who explains differently:

Samael [an angel of God, the accuser] sees that there is no sin in them on Yom Kippur. He says to God: Master of the worlds, You have one people on earth who are like the ministering angels in Heaven. Just as the ministering angels are barefoot, so Israel is barefoot on Yom Kippur; just as the ministering angels neither eat nor drink, so Israel does not eat or drink on Yom Kippur, just as the ministering angels cannot bend, so Israel stands all Yom Kippur; just as with the ministering angels, peace serves as an intermediary between them, so with Israel, peace serves as an intermediary between them on Yom Kippur; just as the ministering angels are free of all sin, so Israel is free of all sin on Yom Kippur. God hears the testimony of Israel from their accuser and He atones for the altar and for the Temple and for the priests and for the entire congregation.

Tur, Orach Chaim 606

ראה סמאל שלא נמצא חטא
בישראל ביום הכפורים ואומר
רבון העולם יש לך עם אחד
בארץ כמלאכי השרת מה מלאכי
השרת יחיפי רגל אף ישראל
יחיפי רגל ביה"כ מה מלאכי
השרת אין להם קפיצה אף
ישראל אין להם קפיצה עומדין
על רגליהם ביום הכפורים מה
מלאכי השרת נקיים מכל חטא
כך ישראל נקיים מכל חטא מה
מה"ש שלום ביניהם כך ישראל
ביום הכפורים והקב"ה שומע
עדותן מן המקטרגין ומכפר
עליהם.
שור, אורח חיים סימן תרו

The *Tur* explains that on Yom Kippur, there is a special motivation to bring peace among the Jewish People—so that God will grant us the blessings of a peaceful new year full of more opportunities even when we present him with less.

Thus the reader forgives anyone who has wronged him, in the hope of both enabling others to be forgiven and to receive Divine grace himself. Here on the eve of Yom Kippur, we approach God for forgiveness in recognition of our lesser state and just then we are reminded of how much more we have to give to each other, thus bringing us closer to becoming the type of person who God can forgive. Appeasement is not simply for the purpose of atonement. It is a form of giving up something in order to become a better person. We lay to rest the impressions of achievements, the material successes, the domain in which we are sole decisors, and in essence we sacrifice a part of ourselves to remember how much more we are capable of being.

This models the unique balance we strive to achieve on Yom Kippur. On Yom Kippur, in form and in function, we are in fact "less than" and still becoming "more" because of that recognition. As we take stock, it is not uncommon to realize that we have not achieved to the best of our abilities. Thus we are more cognizant than ever of the loss of these potential achievements, left behind in the past. If in our state of fasting and deprivations we are diminished, it is not only because we are weakened by a lack of food, water or basic pleasures, but rather, it is because of a certain humility that surrounds us. We stand before God without a great list of achievements, trying desperately to be angelic, since as humans we haven't produced enough this year. It is in this state of impoverished loss, and as diminished masters, that we can raise our voices in an ennobled prayer. Now we can understand how much strength we can get from the mundane celebrations, joys and pleasures of life, and how much we are called upon to accomplish utilizing those tools.

When we consider what it means that Yom Kippur has such significantly contrasting fundamental values—those of deprivation and celebration—we are reminded that it is human nature to feel deeply, in moments of loss, the resounding memory of what is good, grand and necessary in that which is now gone.

May our tefillot, our preparatory teshuva, and our experiences of loss all propel us to new heights and insights and a *shana tovah umetukah*, a good and sweet new year!