

## **This Year's Finish Line**

Yom Kippur 2009

Rabbi Yosie Levine

This past year, for Shabbat Across America, a member of the Orthodox community invited his secular Jewish co-worker to join him in shul on Shabbos morning. This co-worker hadn't been to shul in years and had actually never been to an Orthodox shul. Every few minutes, he would turn to his Orthodox friend for a little guidance about what was going on in the service:

The cantor bows down. *What's the meaning of that?* He asks.

"Well – at certain times during the service we show humility by bowing."

They open the ark and take out the Torah. *What's the meaning of that?* He asks

"The Torah contains the five books of Moses. Every week we read a certain portion."

The rabbi gets up to speak. He takes off his watch and places it on the lectern.

*What's the meaning of that?* He asks.

"Absolutely nothing."

There's a certain sense of liberation about a day in which we really could do without our watches. Like the angels, on Yom Kippur we occupy a space that seems to transcend time. We have no social gatherings; there are no dinner dates. There are no meeting times on our schedules. The only place we have to be is shul. The only meeting to attend is the one between us and our Creator.

But as much as we let go of time on the micro level, we pay close attention to it on the macro level. It's a day to reflect on the year that's gone by and what it is that we're after in the year ahead.

You'll notice that Yom Kippur begins with a rather strange juxtaposition. Just a moment ago, together with the Chazzan, we said Kol nidrei – which is really an expression of solemn disappointment that we didn't make good on all our commitments. Another year has come and gone – and there are projects that have gone unfinished, vows unkept.

And yet barely a moment later, we recited the bracha of שהחיינו – the bracha we reserve for the most joyous occasions in our lives. We say it at a birth, on a Yom Tov, when we're reunited with a long-lost friend or when we buy something that brings us a special sense of happiness.

How do we reconcile these two seemingly contradictory moods: Regret in one breath and celebration in the next?

It's actually quite an accurate way to capture the tension of Yom Kippur. On the one hand, it is a solemn day. Notice that many of the day's deprivations mirror those of the mourner. Like the אבל, we don't bathe or anoint ourselves. We don't engage in marital relations or wear leather shoes. Why? What's so sad? What are we mourning?

כל נדרי points to the answer: We're mourning opportunities lost. A million little chances that we let go by.

You know – one of the easiest מצוות in the whole Torah is:

ויקרא פרק יט (לב)

מפני שיבה תקום והדרת פני זקן ויראת מאלהיך אני יקוק;

Stand up for the aged; rise to show respect for those who are old; fear your God. I am the Lord.

Why the extra four words at the end? Why does the Torah need to go out of its way to tell us Fear your God – I am the Lord? Rashi tells us why. It's because the Torah knows human nature. It's so easy, Rashi says, to avert your eyes – to turn away – to pretend you didn't notice that a person walked by to whom you owe respect. No one will know. You're sure to get away with it. So the Torah tells us – yes – you could get away with it. But you'll only be fooling yourself.

- How many times this year did we pretend not to notice?
- How many times this year did we put our own needs too far ahead of someone else's?
- How many times did we let an opportunity to do a mitzvah go by the boards?

So on the one hand, we are mourners today. Over and over again we'll beat our chests and confess to the fact that we fell short of the mark. We could have done so much better. On Yom Kippur we stop to acknowledge a real loss. We stop to grieve over what might have been had we only pushed ourselves to our fuller potential.

Yet in the very next breath we recite the bracha of שהחיינו. It's a great joy – a great privilege for us to have reached this milestone – to have made it to another Yom Kippur.

The gemara says that Yom Kippur is a day of great simcha because it's a day of סליחה ומחילה.

It's a little hard to understand. It's true – we're confident that today we'll be forgiven for our sins. But I would call that a sense of relief – not celebration. Where's the simcha in our sins being forgiven?

I think the answer is all about the promise for the future. We're not celebrating the way we celebrate an accomplishment. We're celebrating the world of possibility that lies ahead. Sin bogs us down. It gets us stuck in a rut. It creates all kinds of guilt and resentment and paralysis. If God is really telling us that Yom Kippur wipes the slate clean, a whole galaxy of possibility opens up to us.

Grief over the thought of so many lost opportunities; joy at the thought of so many new ones. This is where we stand at the opening moments of Yom Kippur. This is the unresolved tension of the day.

I would suggest that in thinking about the year ahead, we have the capacity to tip the scales – to make 5770 a year filled with fewer regrets and more celebrations.

Around fifty years ago, there was a man living in New York who was an assimilated Jew. He happened to be a boxer. And somewhere along the line, his son became observant. And when his son would come home, he would always spend his evenings engrossed in the study of the Talmud. And one day his father came over to him and said, “What are you reading? You always seem to be so absorbed in the text – I want to know what it is you’re studying.”

And the son said, “You know – it’s Talmud and it’s really a little complicated to explain.”

So his father said, “OK – so teach me.”

And the son said, “You don’t even know Aleph Beis. This isn’t even Hebrew, it’s Aramaic... it’s very hard....”

And the father said, “OK – so let’s start from the beginning.”

So they started from the beginning. They learned together every day. After a year, the man finished one daf – one page of gemara. And they called Rav Moshe Feinstein – the greatest halachic authority of his generation – to ask him if they could make a siyum on one daf of gemara. And Rav Moshe said, “Not only can you make a siyum, but I’m coming to the siyyum!”

A short time later, the man passed away. Rav Moshe came to the funeral and asked if he could say a few words. He quoted the famous passage in the gemara:

יש קונה עולמו בשעה אחת – there are those who obtain their place in the world to come in a single moment. And then he went onto say, ויש קונה עולמו בדף אחת – and there are those who obtain their place in the world to come with a single page.

My suggestion to you this year is this: Make a siyyum. It could be on anything you want. Think of a topic, a mitzvah, a text, a contemporary issue – whatever it is – and make it your own. Learn about it. Study it. You could do it yourself – but you’ll have an even better chance of succeeding if you do it with a partner.

Don’t bite off more than you can chew. You don’t have to finish all 2700 pages of Shas between now and next Yom Kippur. But maybe one page. Maybe five pages. It could be anything. Just make it realistic and make it your own. We’ll help you – whether it’s finding the right text, the right class or setting you up with a חברותה – make Torah a priority this year.

קדושין מ:

אמר רב המנונא אין תחילת דינו של אדם אלא על דברי תורה.

Rav Hamnuna used to teach – on the Day of Judgment – on Yom Kippur – a person is judged first and foremost on the virtues of the Torah he’s learned.

5769 has reached its end. But 5770 is just beginning.

Many books are open to Hashem on this day. One book is open to us everyday. Let's make it a year filled with מצוות and filled with Torah. Let's make it a year filled with reasons to celebrate.