

Stanton St. Shul
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Unmet Expectations:
A Kol Nidrei Drashah

I think it's fair to assume that, after a year like this, everyone here is familiar with the disappointment that comes with unmet expectations. Shoshana and I expected to spend Pesach with my family in Israel, and we were disappointed when that proved impossible due to COVID. Many of us in this room may not have expected to be here right now, or under these circumstances. Undoubtedly, many of us had expected to be at different places in our careers, our personal lives, our relationships. None of us could have expected the many different ways in which COVID would repeatedly disappoint our expectations. And while unmet expectations lead to disappointment, oftentimes disappointment gives way to shame, as we struggle to accept our own failures. I expected to do more. To be better.

It is with this pain and disappointment in mind that the Yom Kippur service begins with a rectification for unmet expectations. While I presented Rav Soloveitchik's understanding of Kol Nidrei in my Dvar Torah for the yearly newsletter, right now I want to develop a different approach. Kol Nidrei, at its core, is a ritual ceremony that nullifies unfulfilled or broken vows. If that itself wasn't already enough of an acknowledgement of the real life struggle of failed expectations, we know that this ritual process of vow nullification is predicated upon the concept of Charatah, or regret. I can only nullify a past vow if I can articulate my regret for having taken it in the first place. "Had I known there would be a yeast shortage, I never would have vowed to make my own Challah every week." "Had my expectations been met, I never would have been in this situation."

But while this feeling of disappointment may be all too familiar to those of us in the room right now, its relatability does not explain its centrality to Yom Kippur. Of all things, why should Yom Kippur open with a ritual to make up for unfulfilled vows? Of all the sins in the Torah, is breaking a vow that big of a deal? And even if I accept that Kol Nidrei is about something bigger, and is about finding forgiveness for my failure to meet my own, personal expectations, why is that what God wants to hear right now? Surely there are many more important things to seek forgiveness for at the start of Yom Kippur?

To answer this question and explain how Yom Kippur begins, I'd like to first turn to the climax of the day, the Yom Kippur Temple service that we'll read about tomorrow. As part of the Temple service, amidst the various sacrifices and rituals acts of the day, is the Kohein Gadol's personal sacrifice, the Par Chatat, or bull sin offering. While this might seem like one of many esoteric animal sacrifices, the sin offering of the Kohein Gadol actually stands out as a very unique offering with only one other parallel in the Torah. The Kohein's offering must be a cow, is fully burnt outside of the Temple, and all who were involved in the ceremony become rendered Tamei, ritually impure. These laws directly parallel the laws of the Parah Adumah, the red heifer, and together these two sacrifices create their own category: Chatas Chutz, cow sin offerings that are burnt outside of the Temple.

And yet, while these two sacrifices parallel each other in obvious ways, they also differ in surprising ways. On a shallow level, the two sacrifices obviously differ, as the Red Heifer's ashes are collected and used to make purification waters, to purify those who came into contact with a dead body. But beyond their different telos, these sacrifices surprisingly differ in their details. One striking difference between the two sacrifices arises in Rebbe Shimon's position. Rebbe Shimon, in the Tosefta in Parah (4:9), disagrees with the Chachamim and says that if a Psul or form of disqualifying blemish develops on a red heifer before the ritual process is complete and the carcass is put on the fire to burn, then the entire process is disqualified, and the carcass is not even considered a Parah Adumah. As such, none of the people involved in the process would be rendered impure, and the carcass would not need to be burnt. The Tosefta explains Rebbe Shimon's logic with the rule that Parah Adumah Nidonet Al Sheim Sofah, the red heifer's status is judged based on the final outcome. If it produces a kosher pile of heifer ashes, then it was a red heifer. If something disturbs the process, then the whole thing was for naught.

And yet, while Rebbe Shimon is the one to say this by Parah Adumah, when we look at the parallel case by the Kohein Gadol's bull offering we see something shocking. The Gemara

in Yoma 61b tells us that Rebbe Shimon holds, on Yom Kippur, if a Psul or mistake occurs in the middle of the process of preparing the Kohein Gadol's bull offering, such as spilling the blood on the floor before sprinkling it on the altar, the Kohein Gadol should slaughter a new bull, pick up where he left off in the Temple service, and both bulls will be considered holy. Anyone who was involved in the preparation of either bull– even the one that eventually proved disqualified– are rendered Tamei and both carcasses must be burnt. This law clearly stands in contrast to Rebbe Shimon's position by the red heifer that, in a similar case, no one would be impure as a disqualified heifer isn't even a Parah Adumah. The very same Rebbe Shimon who says that Parah Adumah is judged based on the final product is now saying the exact opposite by the bull of Yom Kippur! Why should the sin offering on Yom Kippur come with a participation trophy but not that of Parah Adumah?

I think the answer lies in a cryptic comment of Rabbeinu Chananeil (10th c. Northern Africa) on the Gemara in Yoma. Rabbeinu Chananeil comments on Rebbe Shimon's ruling that everyone involved with either bull on Yom Kippur would be rendered Tamei, and adds a justification. Rabbeinu Chananeil explains since both bulls– even the one that didn't complete its mission– contributed towards Kaparah, towards the atonement of the Yom Kippur service, therefore both count and anyone involved in either would be rendered Tamei. Even though the blood of the first bull was ultimately spilled on the ground, and not sprinkled on the Mizbeiach, nonetheless, the Kohein who collected that blood into a bowl would still be considered Tamei as that step itself was inherently valuable. In other words, Rabbeinu Chananeil lays down a foundational rule. In distinction to the binary world of purity and impurity that the Parah Adumah populates, the sacrifices on Yom Kippur are about Kapparah, atonement. And in the world of atonement, every step matters. Even if you aren't able to finish, even if the blood is going to be spilled on the floor, still it contributes.

Thus, we can understand Rebbe Shimon's position. By Parah Adumah, we are dealing with a strict binary. One is either pure or impure. This is either a Kosher Parah Adumah, or a

non-Kosher Parah Adumah. So, if something arises before the process is finished, it is all for naught. But by Yom Kippur, we are dealing with a process of repentance. And in this process, even if you can't make it all the way to the finish line, every step matters. Just the fact that you tried is important. And this isn't a token, trivial participation trophy. At its heart, atonement is about preserving and building a relationship, and in relationships, it is often the thought that counts more than the act. And so, even the unsuccessful bull counts for something.

The Mabit (16th c. Tzefat) expresses this idea powerfully in his book on prayer and penitence, the Beit Elokim (Shaar HaTeshuvah 12). The Mabit says התשובה בכל חלק שיעשה יש לו קצת שכר ולפי מה שירבה כן ירבה סליחתו Teshuvah, for every amount that you do it, it has a portion of reward. And according to the amount you multiply it, so too your forgiveness will be multiplied. The Mabit goes on to describe a theory of Teshuvah Chelkit, partial repentance, in which he describes that every single action we do towards repentance counts. If we promise never to do a sin again, but fail, that counts. If we regret a sin, but don't even promise to change, that regret counts for something. If we don't even feel regret, but we want to, even that thought of "I should change" counts for the Mabit.

The Mabit quotes a Yerushalmi (Taanis 2) from our Haftorah of Yonah tomorrow. We know in the Haftorah of Yonah, Yonah is tasked with telling the people of Ninveh to repent from their sinful ways, and in the conclusion of the book, God spares Ninveh from destruction. In the Yerushalmi, picking up on the verse's strange description of Ninveh as being warned to "turn away from the evil that is in their hands" (Yonah 3:8), R' Yochanan qualifies that the people of Ninveh only turned away from the evil that they were currently engaged in, but they did not make up for the evil they did in the past. But even this small token gesture of repentance was enough to save the entire city of Ninveh! All the more so, says the Mabit, we who are trying to achieve repentance. Thus, the theology of the Mabit reflects the Halakhot of Rebbe Shimon, as we see in the world of repentance and relationships, every bit you do counts.

And so, we return to our initial question. Why do we begin Yom Kippur with Kol Nidrei, a ceremony to nullify unfulfilled vows? Why does God need to hear this in our prayer? Kol Nidrei is not, in fact, for God, but rather, it is a reminder and a call to action for all of us. Any attempt to change will undoubtedly be met with numerous failures before it can ever be met with success. Any religious commitment one wants to take on, be it as formal and halakhic as a Neder, or as personal as thinking “I really should go to Miynan more,” is bound to meet obstacles along the way and often not meet our expectations. Almost every New Years resolution is met with eventual disappointment. But Kol Nidrei comes to remind us that that’s ok. We’re forgiven for our unfulfilled vows, and aren’t held accountable for our own expectations, because at the end of the day, what really matters is that we tried. In the world of Teshuvah, as we strive to grow our moral and spiritual sensitivity, and repair our relationship with God, our intentions and efforts count too, not just our results. Even if the blood spills on the ground, it’s still Michapeir.

And so, as we sit here now post-Kol Nidrei, with the entirety of Yom Kippur service left before ourselves, let us take a moment to free ourselves from the baggage of past efforts and past failures. To forgive ourselves for not meeting our own expectations. And let us now recommit to give it our all this upcoming year. To take advantage of these 24 hours of Yom Kippur and to put our heart into them. Because at the end of the day, when it comes to Kaparah and self-growth, it doesn’t matter how long your Shmoneh Esrei is, or how many Minyanim you did or didn’t make. What matters is how hard you’ve tried, so let’s give it our all.

Remembering Those We Can't Forget:
A Yizkor Drashah

Having experienced loss, I've long found the name "Yizkor" to be very surprising. Drawing on the Hebrew root Zeicher, Yizkor is named after memory, as a remembrance for those who we have lost. But when you lose someone, you never forget them. You couldn't if you tried. So why do we need a ritual dedicated to remembering our loved ones? Isn't every day that we live without them, and that we carry on their memory, a Yizkor?

Beyond the intuitive problems, Yizkor is also difficult to understand from a halakhic standpoint. The Gemara in Zevachim 9b establishes a principle of Halakha: Ein Kaparah LeMeitim, once someone has passed, there is no longer the possibility for further atonement. The Gemara invokes this principle to explain that, if someone brings a sin offering but dies before it is offered, the sacrifice no longer atones for anything, as it can't atone for its deceased owner. And to some extent, this idea makes sense. While you are alive, God gives you every opportunity to repent and grow and develop your relationship with Him. But after you've passed, your life is reviewed in its entirety and taken for what you have accomplished. How can you change anything after your book has been closed?

Indeed, it should be unsurprising that the Sefer Chasidim (12th c. Germany), following this logic, argues (Siman 605) that there is no value in praying for a deceased wicked person, because they have already sealed their fate, rendering the prayer totally ineffective. But if sacrifices and prayer can't make a difference after death, what are we accomplishing with our Yizkor?

While we are used to saying Yizkor on every holiday of the calendar, the original source of Yizkor was actually limited to just today, Yom Kippur. The Midrash Tanchumah (Ha'azinu) records a tradition to pray for the dead on Yom Kippur and to pledge Tzedakah in their memory as part of the Teshuvah process. Based on this, the Kol Bo (14th c. Provence) arrives at a difficult conclusion. The Kol Bo explains that Yizkor is not for the deceased, but rather, is part of our own Teshuvah process on Yom Kippur. By reminding ourselves of death and loss, we emphasize the stakes and motivate ourselves to keep the Mitzvot and live a good life.

While perhaps that may have been the experience in the time of the Kol Bo, I don't think any of us would say that that encapsulates our Yizkor or Yom Kippur experiences. The fear of death, while perhaps expressed in dramatic moments of UNetaneh Tokef, is not an anxiety-inducing specter over our Yom Kippur Davening for most, and Yizkor is not merely a part of that process. Minimally, if that were to be true, then surely those who had never lost a parent should be saying Yizkor too— perhaps, even more so than those who have experienced first hand loss! So if the Kol Bo's answer is difficult, what is the reason behind our Yizkor ceremony?

Rebbe Eliezer of Worms (12th c. Germany) poses our very question, and asks (Rokeiach 217) "what good does it do to give Tzedakah on behalf of the deceased?" He answers that when one gives charity in the memory of a loved one, God evaluates whether the loved one themselves would have taken such an action were they alive, and if they would have, credits it to them. Prayer and good deeds on behalf of the dead are not a magical formula that protects them from punishment. Rather, the good deed is identified with the lost loved one themselves, and if it is consistent with how they lived their life, and is the type of thing they would have done, then it counts as if they did it. Because of this, if one gives Tzedakah on behalf of a wicked person, it is ineffective, as the wicked person's fate is already sealed, like the Sefer Chasidim we quoted above. In other words, Rebbe Eliezer of Worms identifies the Mitzvah with the deceased themselves, explaining that God considers it as if the lost loved one themselves had committed that good deed.

This is expressed even clearer in the words of the Rashba (Rabbi Shlomo ben Aderet 13th c. Barcelona). The Rashba, in a responsum (5:49), describes how children are not just physical byproducts of their parents, but are spiritually connected and linked to them. Children are comparable to spiritual extensions of their parents' personhood, as parents gave from themselves to create a new life. As such, when a child does a good action, it is as if the parent themselves is doing that action, and therefore, it counts as a good deed on behalf of the parent.

Just like Rebbe Eliezer of Worms, the Rashba explains that we are not trying to achieve post-facto atonement. Rather, we are clarifying the extent of the deceased's good deeds, by demonstrating the many Mitzvot their lives and legacies continue to inspire.

Thus, we arrive not at a magic ritual to protect against the flames of hell, but a powerful statement about the impact our lost loved ones had and continue to have on us. By doing good deeds and living our lives in consonance with the values our loved ones stood for, we demonstrate to God the extent of the merits and the legacy the deceased has left behind. It is not *our* actions that are helping our loved ones, but their own, as we are expressions of their legacy, and extensions of their spiritual being. If our parents raised children who pray, give charity, stand for justice and work to actualize God's vision of peace, surely they must have led impressive religious lives and are deserving of the choicest of lots in the World to Come.

Given this perspective, we can perhaps rehabilitate the seemingly unrelatable explanation of the Kol Bo. While our experience of Yom Kippur is not as animated by the fear of death and threat of next-worldly punishment, perhaps it should be motivated by the legacies we carry on and the chains of tradition we represent. In addition to serving as a spiritual boost for the deceased, Yizkor should serve as a reminder to all of us of the proud legacy we stand for. By centering ourselves as the products of our parents and the latest link in a chain of values, we are able to recommit ourselves to the mission of moral and religious growth, and to motivate ourselves to bring more good into the world, and by doing such, to make our loved ones proud. And thus, as the Kol Bo suggested, Yizkor might not just be for the deceased, as it plays an essential role in our own motivations and development on Yom Kippur.

And so, we can return to the question with which we opened. Yizkor is not a "remembrance" in the sense of forgetting and remembering. Rather, it is closer to the biblical meaning of the word. Repeatedly the Torah tells us that God "remembers" people. On Rosh HaShanah we read about how God remembered Sarah, and similar language is used by other infertile matriarchs. But does God ever forget? Rather, in the biblical context, LiZkor means less

“to remember” and more “to invoke” or “to call to attention to.” Such a name is surely fitting, as we invoke the legacy of our loved ones– to God, to demonstrate to him the extent of their good deeds, and to ourselves, to recommit ourselves to a life of values and meaning. And so, as we are about to say Yizkor for a year that, unfortunately, has experienced all too much loss, let us invoke the memory of those lost, and let it motivate us through this Yom Kippur season into the new year.

Jonah and the Methods of Rationality:
A Pre-Ne'ilah Drashah

In his *Ethics*, Spinoza writes that "repentance is no virtue, and does not spring from reason; but whosoever repents a deed is doubly oppressed and incapable." Spinoza is but one of many thinkers to challenge the irrational nature of repentance. And indeed, upon reflection, it does seem irrational. How can I, in the present, make up for what I did in the past by simply seeking forgiveness? That's not how it works in the "real world." You can't break the law, and then give an impassioned apology and get off scot free. Actions are significant and have consequences. How is it that in my relationship with God, where the stakes are arguably even higher, my actions are easily dismissed as forgivable. While a day long with fasting and prayer may be difficult for many, in the grand scheme of things it's a pretty good deal. If one day of fasting forgave legal crimes, or relationship crimes against your friends and family, I think many people would be eager to take advantage of it.

But it is not just theologically questionable figures like Spinoza who point out the irrational nature of Teshuvah. Indeed, the Ramchal (18th c. Italy) in the fourth chapter of the *Mesillat Yesharim* (4:35-39) writes:

"For according to strict justice it would be proper that... there be no possible repair whatsoever for the sin. For in truth, how can a man rectify what he has made crooked after committing the sin? If one murdered his fellow or committed adultery, how can he possibly rectify this? Can he undo a deed already done from existence?"

The Ramchal notes that strict justice leaves no room for repentance. You can't undo the actions of your past with a simple apology. Given that, it should come as no surprise that Chazal on *Pesachim* 54b identify Teshuvah, repentance, as one of the things that was formed before God started creation. By its very character, Teshuvah had to exist both outside of nature and before it. Repentance must exist outside of nature because it defies the natural order of cause and effect, actions and repercussions. Teshuvah had to predate nature because without its extralegal mercy, surely the world would have been destroyed by now, as the Ramchal writes. It should come as no surprise that R. Meir Simcha of Dvinsk in the *Meshoch Chochmah* (*Devarim*

30:20) says that, much like the world was created through Chesed and God's irrational generosity, so too Teshuvah is a byproduct of divine charity— an irrational act of Chessed.

Turning to the Haftorah we read earlier, we see that the difficulty of the seeming absurdity of Teshuvah extends all the way back to the bible. Yonah is given a message to deliver to the people of Ninveh, that they are about to be punished if they do not perform Teshuvah. Yonah rejects this message, and attempts to out-run God rather than deliver this prophecy. What bothered Yonah so much that he attempted to reject and escape God's will? And does he really think he can outrun God?

Yonah was given the charge of inspiring Ninveh to perform Teshuvah and escape punishment. But Yonah was unable to accept the justice of this message. When man sins, man should be punished. The fact that man could sin and then repent and be forgiven is illogical, and Yonah, incapable of conceptualizing this absurdity— this injustice— chooses to protest it. Yonah's fleeing was a dramatic expression of the natural uncomfortableness man experiences when he tries to intellectually conquer the possibility of Teshuvah. Yonah knows he cannot escape God. His desire to run to Tarshish is not an escape attempt, but a statement of protest.

Yonah's emphasis on understandable, rational justice— on sin and punishment— is evident in the very first time we hear Yonah speak. Yonah's first words in his book are said in the face of an impending storm that threatens to wipe out the boat he was attempting to flee on. Knowing himself to be the cause, Yonah identifies himself to his fellow sailors before telling them to cast him into the water. Yonah says “עֲבָרִי אֲנִי; וְאֶת-יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי הַשָּׁמַיִם, אֲנִי יִרָא” I am a Hebrew, and I fear God. Yonah identifies himself as one who fears God, as Yonah, the rationalist, relates to God as the just adjudicator of punishment. Fear is the basis for Yonah's relationship with God— not love— as God is the punisher and enforcer of His will. Given that relationship to God, Yonah outs himself and willingly submits to his punishment— being thrown into the sea— as he knows he deserves it. If Yonah is successfully thrown into the sea and killed, he wins. He has made his statement of protest against Teshuvah, as he will become

memorialized as a dramatic example of God's punishment. If you sin, if you disobey God, you get killed.

But Yonah, despite his sinful ways, despite ignoring God, is unexpectedly spared. Sitting in the belly of the whale, recognizing that his just punishment is impossible, that he has lost in the face of God's will, Yonah is moved to engage in the illogical and prays. God hears Yonah's prayer, and rather than allowing Yonah to die as a testament to divine punishment, Yonah becomes a symbol of Teshuvah as God miraculously saves him.

That said, that experience only goes so far. Yonah, now convinced of the inevitability of God's will if not the justness of it, goes to Ninveh and begrudgingly delivers God's message of Teshuvah. Using as few words as possible, Yonah half heartedly manages to say "In 40 days Ninveh will be destroyed" before promptly exiting the scene. While unable to deny the reality of Teshuvah, Yonah remains unhappy with its absurdity, as its justice remains outside of Yonah's ability to understand.

Given that, it's no surprise that when the people of Ninveh repent and are forgiven, Yonah's immediate reaction is anger— a word we rarely see directed towards God in Tanach. Yonah is angry at God for seemingly undermining the very backbone of his moral and religious beliefs. The fact that Ninveh was spared confirms for Jonah that the divine doctrine of reward and punishment is merely a joke. It is with that context that Jonah surprisingly tells God he would rather die than be alive. While Jonah in the belly of the whale sang a different tune, indignant Jonah in a fit of rage claims he'd rather die a martyr to the cause of justice than live in a ruleless world.

The story concludes with God's last attempt to convince Yonah. God causes a tree to grow and provide Yonah shade, only to immediately cause it to wither and die. Yonah, suffering in the desert sun, angrily confronts God over the tree's death. God responds saying that Yonah has pity over this tree, which he neither made nor labored over, but God should not have mercy over the thousands of lives in Ninveh?

The story concludes with an unresolved question. But more than merely unresolved, the question seems unsatisfying. God's argument— that if Yonah pity's a plant he should surely pity the people of Ninveh— though seemingly couched in a logical form, is illogical. In no way does it begin to address Yonah's deeply troubling questions of justice. Thus, Yonah's complaints against the absurdity of Teshuvah seemingly stand. But God is not attempting to make a logical point. Rather, God is arguing based on experience. Yonah experienced genuine emotion— a feeling of loss— at the death of the tree. Should that same emotional appeal, that same feeling of loss, not also move God? In other words, the seemingly unsettled conclusion of Yonah is that often we are left with unanswered questions— as the Haftorah ends with God's unanswered question to Yonah. But sometimes, our questions, our intellectual drive, should be subservient to our emotional experience. True, God does not answer Yonah's objections, but he demonstrates that Yonah can experience pain and loss, and can relate to the emotional power that that suffering invokes.

353 days of the Jewish year, we work to develop our relationship with God through Yediyas Hashem, knowledge of the divine. Talmud Torah, the intellectual act, holds a unique devotional role in Judaism, as we pride ourselves in our intellectualism and religious depth. But one day a year, on Yom Kippur, we are faced with Yonah's dilemma— as counter as it may run to our natural intuition, we are forced to acknowledge the prioritization of emotion, not intellectualism, in the face of God's mercy. Yonah's reason cannot justify Teshuvah. But his emotions, the feelings he experiences when his tree is taken away from him, can begin to lay the foundation for understanding our relationship with God.

In my Shabbos Shuvah Drashah, I quoted some of my favorite Pessukim in the Torah.

(יא) כִּי הַמִּצְוָה הַזֹּאת אֲשֶׁר אָנֹכִי מֵצִוְךָ הַיּוֹם לֹא־נִפְלֶאת הוּא מִמֶּךָ וְלֹא רַחֲקָה הוּא: (יב) לֹא בַשָּׁמַיִם הוּא לֵאמֹר מִי יַעֲלֶה־לָנוּ הַשָּׁמַיְמָה וְיִקְחֶה לָנוּ וְיִשְׁמַעֵנוּ אֶתְּהָ וְנַעֲשֶׂנָּה: (יג) וְלֹא־מֵעֵבֶר לַיָּם הוּא לֵאמֹר מִי יַעֲבֹר־לָנוּ אֶל־עֵבֶר הַיָּם וְיִקְחֶה לָנוּ וְיִשְׁמַעֵנוּ אֶתְּהָ וְנַעֲשֶׂנָּה: (יד) כִּי־קָרוֹב אֵלֶיךָ הַדְּבָר מֵאֵד בְּפִיךָ וּבְלִבְּךָ לַעֲשׂוֹתוֹ: (טו)

(11) Surely, this Mitzvah which I enjoin upon you this day is not too baffling for you, nor is it beyond reach. (12) It is not in the heavens, that you should say, “Who among us can go up to the heavens and get it for us and impart it to us, that we may observe it?” (13) Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, “Who among us can cross to the other side of the sea and get it for us and impart it to us, that we may observe it?” (14) No, the thing is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to observe it.

God movingly tells us that “this Mitzvah,” an ambiguous but obviously essential commandment, is very close to us, residing in our hearts and our mouths. Unsurprisingly, interpretations differ as to which of the 613 “this Mitzvah” is referring to. While according to Rambam this section is describing the Mitzvah of Talmud Torah, Ramban disagrees and maintains that HaMitzvah HaZot is referring to Teshuvah. But it is no coincidence that Talmud Torah and Teshuvah are competing for this important status as “HaMitzvah HaZot.” These two Mitzvot represent two diametrically opposed models of connection with God. Torah, at its core, is channeling our intellectual and rational abilities into further developing our religiosity. But Teshuvah exists outside of the rational. It is the unbridled charity that overflows from God’s love for creation. It is motivated by the pain Yonah feels at the loss of his Kikayon, and the anguish it causes God to be far from his creations. The other 353 days a year we may hold like the Rambam. We pursue our relationship with God through the closeness and tangibility of Talmud Torah— through the intellectual and the rational. But at least today, on Yom Kippur, we should open ourselves to the Ramban— to the emotional feeling of closeness to God. BeFichah UBiLvavcha LaAsot. It’s in our hearts, not our minds.

The Yerushalmi in Makkot records the following Midrash:

שאלו לחכמה חוטא מהו עונשו אמרו להם [משלי יג כא] חטאים תרדף רעה. שאלו לנבואה חוטא מהו עונשו אמרה להן [יחזקאל יח ד] הנפש החוטאת היא תמות שאלו לקודשא בריך הוא חוטא מהו עונשו אמר להן יעשו תשובה ויתכפר לו.

“They asked Wisdom, ‘what should be the punishment for a sinner?’ He answered ‘sinners are pursued by badness.’ They asked Prophecy, ‘what should be the punishment for a sinner?’ He answered, ‘One who sins shall die.’ They asked the Holy One Blessed Be He, ‘what should be the punishment for the sinner?’ God answered, ‘Let them repent and be atoned for.’”

It may not be logical, it may not be understandable— wisdom demands justice and law seeks punishment— but today, as the sun is setting and the day is coming to a close, God eagerly awaits our return. Let’s not disappoint.

Explanatory Mussaf Avodah

We will now begin the central part of the Yom Kippur Davening, the Avodah in Mussaf. Page 242¹ has an organized order of the temple service for people to follow along if they are curious or get confused.

Pp. 584-590:

We now begin the heart of the Yom Kippur service, the Avodah— a prolonged poem written about the historical temple service that would take place on Yom Kippur in the times of the Beit HaMikdash. The Avodah opens up by setting the cosmic stage, beginning with creation and God's very first relationship with mankind, as he made Adam and Eve. This quickly transitions to the Yom Kippur Temple service, implying that the entirety of human history has built up to this very moment, as the stakes of the Temple service are God's very relationship with mankind as a whole.

I'd like to call everyone's attention to a line at the top of page 588. Having now transitioned to the "current day" and introduced the Kohein Gadol, the poem says:

תחת אהרן מגזעו יעמוד כהן גדול לשרת לפניך ביום הסליחה

In the place of Aharon, from his stock, a High Priest will stand to service before you on the day of forgiveness.

The poet's use of the phrase "Tachat Aharon," in Aharon's place, recalls a peculiarity of the Pessukim in the Torah in presenting the Yom Kippur Temple service. In Parashat Achrei Mos, the Temple Service for Yom Kippur is introduced with the phrase: בזאת יבא אהרן אל הקדש, with this Aharon shall approach the Holies. Indeed, while typically the Torah presents commandments in a generalized form to all Kohanim, and targeted towards future generations, the presentation of the Yom Kippur Avodah seems localized to Aharon. Throughout this section of the Torah, the commandments are repeatedly addressed specifically to Aharon. In fact, no

¹ Note: All pages are for the Artscroll Nusach Sefarad Machzor.

mention of Yom Kippur itself appears, as there are no clues in the Torah that this is a Yom Kippur ritual, and not just a ritual that Aharon has the right to do at his own discretion.

Indeed, only after presenting all of the various steps Aharon should do “to enter the Holies,” the Torah concludes by changing gears and suddenly starting to address future generations. Here the Torah tells us (VaYikra 16:32)

וְכֹהֵן הַכֹּהֵן אֲשֶׁר-יִמָּשַׁח אֹתוֹ וְאֲשֶׁר יִמְלֵא אֶת-יָדָיו לְכַהֵן תַּחַת אָבִיו

And he shall atone, the Kohein who was anointed and whose hands were filled to serve as Kohein in place of his father [Aharon].

Again we see this phrase. **Tachat Aviv**. The poet is drawing on the Torah’s emphasis on the centrality of Aharon, the personality, in this service. Future Kohanim only have the right to do this service insofar as they are serving in the place of Aharon.

Based on this presentation, the Vilna Gaon quotes a Midrash that implies that, in fact, Aharon could do this Temple ritual whenever he pleased. If Aharon ever wanted to go into the holies or holy of holies— a part of the temple that was usually restricted— he would merely have to do these ritual steps. So why, then, is this temple service relegated to being only once a year, on Yom Kippur, for future generations?

I think the key lies in this idea of “Tachat Aharon.” The ability to enter the holy of holies, God’s most intimate space, and entreat God on behalf of the Jewish people was fundamentally a right that only Aharon HaKohein was ever granted. It was not given to the Kehunah overall, nor is it tied to the specialness of the day of Yom Kippur. It was Aharon himself, and his personality, that merited this special VIP access to God. But if that’s the case, when Aharon died, the Jewish people and the world as a whole would lose their only connection to God’s most intimate space. Therefore, to ensure this link between God and man would remain, Yom Kippur was designated as a day where the Kohein Gadol, through a process of 7 days of preparation and training, would rise to the occasion and actually embody his ancestor, serving not merely as Kohein Gadol, but as a living embodiment of Aharon HaKohein himself. On Yom

Kippur the Kohein Gadol is Tachat Aharon, in Aharon's place, as the ritual of the day transforms a random Kohein at a random point of time into Aharon HaKohein himself, thus granting him VIP access to God's holy of holies.

But the question remains, what makes Aharon— not as an idea or as a position, but as a human being and a personality— so special that he was granted access to God's most intimate chamber? And why is it that only someone like Aharon is capable of doing the job on Yom Kippur?

I think the answer lies in the continuation of the Avodah we're about to perform. At this stage in the Avodah, the Kohein Gadol has done the Temidim, the regularly daily sacrificial work that is performed in the temple, and has begun the Yom Kippur-specific part of his service. This Yom Kippur service begins with the Par Chatas of the Kohein Gadol, the bull sin offering that the Kohein Gadol brings on behalf of himself, his family, and his entire tribe. It is noteworthy that the Kohein Gadol can only ask for atonement for the Jewish people if he has first asked for atonement for himself. Indeed, the Kohein Gadol must be a Baal Teshuvah first and foremost, because only a Baal Teshuvah can seriously understand sin and repentance to properly lead the Jewish people on Yom Kippur.

But what exactly is the Kohein Gadol atoning for with his bull sin offering? In addition to the various personal sins a particular Kohein Gadol may carry on his conscience, the Midrash tells us that the bull offering of the Kohein Gadol atones for one sin in particular. The Midrash notes that the other sin offerings brought on Yom Kippur are all goats, so why is the Kohein Gadol's sin offering a cow? The Midrash explains that, at its core, every time the High Priest offers his Yom Kippur bull, he is reliving and re-repenting for the instrumental role Aharon played in the sin of the Golden Calf. We know that ultimately it was Aharon who forged the Golden Calf with his own hands, and who failed to deter the Jewish people from sinning. By requiring the Kohein Gadol to offer a cow, the Torah is forcing this now-living embodiment of

Aharon to relive the experience of repenting for one of the gravest sins in Jewish history– the Cheit HaEigel.

Now, we can begin to understand what was unique about Aharon, the historical personality, that earned him the privilege of entering God’s holiest space, and made him the model for future Yom Kippur efforts. Firstly, Aharon is a model of how even the greatest amongst us can still commit horrible sins– facilitating nationwide idolatry– but can still recover and maintain a deep relationship with God. Aharon rebounded from the Cheit HaEigel and went on to serve as the High Priest! But beyond the general narrative of Teshuvah from sin, the story of Aharon’s sin by the golden calf is particularly significant. VaYikrah Rabbah (10:3) tells us that Aharon in particular was picked as the Kohein Gadol because he loved justice and hated punishment. It was these very same peace-loving compromise-pursuing humanitarian values that ultimately led Aharon to compromise in the face of mounting pressure and to allow the Jewish people to build their calf. That very same sense of empathy that allowed Aharon to relate so much to the Jewish people, that he ultimately gave in to their sinful urges, is what makes Aharon praiseworthy and deserving of his special status in the priesthood. And it is that very same sense of unending patience, empathy, and identification with the Jewish people that the Kohein Gadol strives to impersonate and embody every Yom Kippur as he steps into Aharon’s shoes and begins his Yom Kippur service by asking for atonement for the Golden Calf.

Thus, we see that if the Kohein Gadol is going to embody Aharon HaKohein and serve as our model of successful Teshuvah and our representative in front of God, he needs to have the first hand experience of sin to be able to understand our sinful mistakes, and the capacity for empathy and a love of the Jewish people to seek out that understanding. Only a leader who is out there amongst the weeds with his people, like Aharon HaKohein, can properly serve as our model of empathy and brotherhood as we, together as a nation, work towards collective repentance.

We will now continue on page 590 where we will carry on the play-like reenactment of the day. Just like the Kohein Gadol of old would relive and reenact the steps of his ancestor, Aharon, we in Shul reenact the physical motions of our ancestors. Thus, Mordechai will now recite the personal confessional over the bull sin offering, like the Kohein Gadol used to do, and we the Jewish people upon hearing the Kohein's invocation of God's name in his confessional will fall to our faces and praise God's holy name.

p. 592

Now the Kohein Gadol must take the two goats designated as national sin offerings and, via a lottery, determine which goat will be offered in the holies to God, and which goat will be cast away as the Se'ri LeAzazel, ultimately pushed to its death off the edge of a cliff.

The central role that the lottery— a paradigm of luck, and thereby, of divine providence— plays in specifically designating the sin offerings is no coincidence. We know that Yom Kippur is a Yom KiPurim, a day like Purim, a holiday which is also named after the Purim, or lotteries, that lie at the heart of drama of the day. Our recognition that luck must play a role in the designation of which goat merits to go inside to God's holiest of chambers, and which goat is cast away, is our recognition that even in the world of sin and repentance, we are forced to acknowledge moral luck and divine providence, as many things in this world are out of our hands. Our only option is to try our best and do all that we can.

The Kohein Gadol will now share the lottery results, declaring the winner as "LaHashem Chatat," a sin offering for God. Again at the mention of God's divine name, we, embodying our ancient ancestors, will all bow out of reverence.

P. 594

Having completed the designation of the two goat sin offerings, the Kohein is now almost ready to begin the actual action of the day. But before he starts slaughtering anything, he must return once again to his bull sin offering. But while he has already confessed for his sins, and the historical sin of Aharon HaKohein, this time he now confesses for the sins of his family and his tribe.

Pp. 594-596

Aharon now begins the temple service. He slaughters his bull offering and collects its blood to sprinkle in front of the ark and Kapores in the Holy of Holies. However, Aharon is not arrogant enough to march into God's most intimate space without a gift, and without any amount of spiritual protection. Thus, after collecting the blood, Aharon must first enter the Holy of Holies with an offering of incense. The gesture invokes the paradigmatic Reiach Nichoach, or sweet smells, that God "enjoys" from our sacrificial gifts, and the cloud of incense smoke serves as cloud cover and protection from coming directly in contact with the divine presence.

We are about to continue with Aharon's prayer in front of the holy of holies, followed by our collective reenactment of the 8 acts of sprinkling the Kohein Gadol would do with the bull's blood (1 upward act and 7 downward). Fascinatingly, while many people conceive of prayer as a newer invention, created as a replacement for the physical temple service, the Paytan, with much backing throughout Chazal, envisions prayer as having been a central part of the Yom Kippur service in addition to the animal sacrifices themselves. Indeed, to some extent it seems that, in addition to whatever obligatory ritual requirement the animal sacrifices fulfilled, they also served as a powerful means to inspire prayer. Additionally, it's striking that at this dramatic and auspicious moment, the prayer the Kohein would recite focuses almost entirely on livelihood and physical comfort— a reminder that physical security and stability are no small things in the eyes of God. Thus, as Mordechai reads the Kohein Gadol's prayer out loud, I encourage

everyone in this room to focus on their prayers for this year. Take this moment as an opportunity to focus your hopes and dreams, as you ask God for the strength and the luck to actualize a successful and meaningful year.

We now continue with the Kohein's prayer on page 596.

Top of p. 598:

The Kohein now repeats the same sacrificial steps, this time with the goat sin offering. He slaughters it, collects its blood, and together we join with him in counting 8 sprinklings.

Middle of p. 598:

The Kohein Gadol now puts down the basin of goat blood, and again picks up the basin of bull blood. He repeats his ritual act of blood sprinkling, but this time he sprinkles the bull's blood outside the holy of holies, parallel to the ritual he just performed inside its curtains.

Middle Again of p. 598:

Now the Kohein Gadol swaps out the bull's blood for goat's blood, and again does 8 sprinklings outside of the holy of holies.

Bottom of p. 598-600:

Finally, the Kohein concludes this section of the service by mixing together the blood of his personal bull offering with the blood of the communal goat offering and sprinkling them together. Much like Aharon cast his lot with the sinful ways of the Jewish people at the sin of the Golden Calf, the Kohein Gadol symbolically demonstrates that today, on Yom Kippur, his lot is mixed in with that of the Jewish people, as he mixes their sin offerings together to conclude this

section of the temple service. The blood mixture is sprinkled on the golden altar, and then spilled on the outer altar.

The Kohein Gadol now turns to the Se'ir LeAzazeil, the goat sin offering that is cast away outside of the temple, and recites a Viduy confessional over it. Again, we will reenact the bowing of the Jewish people when the Kohein Gadol recites God's name outloud.

Bottom of p. 600:

The Kohein now passes the Se'ir LeAzazeil, the goat that is doomed to be castoff, outside the temple, to the Ish Iti, the person designated to walk it to its doom. The Gemara tells us that the nation delineated a path for the Ish Iti with way stations along the way, as the strenuous task of taking this goat all the way out to the desert required many breaks and pit stops. The Jewish people would line up along this path and all watch as the Ish Iti escorted the goat to its death.

Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch notes that the two goats are supposed to symbolize the two different directions one's life can go. One can dedicate one's self to Torah and values and be brought closer to God, like the Se'ir LaHashem, or one can diverge and find themself cast away on a path of self-destruction. Given that, I think the difference between the two sacrificial processes is very stark. For the goat that is sacrificed in the temple, the entire process takes place within the walls of the temple, and is done immediately, as spiritual growth can be achieved in one moment of personal spirituality and intimacy with God. But the Se'ir LeAzazeil is a long drawn out procedure, constantly threatening to burn out before even making it to the end. Our basic and natural inclination is to return to God and enter his holies. It is artificial distractions that leads us down the long path of the Se'ir LeAzazeil. But throughout this path, there are many way stations and opportunities for us to stop and evaluate. Unlike the Se'ir LeAzazeil, we are not doomed to see our own mistakes to their destructive conclusion. As the

Jewish people follow the Se'ir LeAzazel down its path, repeatedly stopping along the way, they are reminded of their multiple opportunities to repent, up to the very last moment.

Having now finished all of the sacrificial work for the day, the Kohein Gadol now enters the courtyard of the Temple and interacts with the Jewish people for the first time. The Kohein Gadol takes out a Torah scroll and reads the biblical account of the temple service he just performed, then reads later sections of the Torah by heart, before concluding with the recitation of blessings on the Mitzvot he has just fulfilled, and prayers on behalf of the Jewish people.

This part of the ritual might come as a surprise, as nowhere do the biblical verses tell us that the Kohein must read from the Torah on Yom Kippur. In fact, though, this is not the only part of Yom Kippur that was omitted from the biblical text and only revealed through the tradition of the Rabbis. Famously, Yom Kippur was one of the most controversial days of the year for the Pharisees, as the Rabbinic practice of Yom Kippur differs from the simplest reading of the text. The rabbis understood that in addition to the ritual ablutions and hand-cleansing written in the Torah, there was a need for additional changes of clothing and cleanses as transitions between rituals. Moreover, the rabbis had a tradition about various details pertaining to the incense ritual the Kohein performed before. Famously, the Sadducees who rejected the rabbinic tradition fought with the rabbis over control of the temple, and in particular, over what the Yom Kippur ritual should look like. In fact, the Mishnah tells us that as part of the preparations for the big day, the Kohein Gadol would have to swear that he will abide by the rabbinic conventions for the day and not follow Sadducee practices.

Rav Soloveitchik points out that, given this historic dispute between the Rabbis and the Sadducees, the Kohein Gadol's Torah reading ritual takes on special meaning. The Kohein Gadol stands up in front of the people and reads the Torah's account of Yom Kippur service, knowing full well that the service he just performed in front of everyone's eyes visibly diverged from the simple meaning in the Torah. The Kohein Gadol is not shying away from the

controversy with the Sadducees, but highlighting it. At the most dramatic moment of the day, when the service is just about to wrap up, the Kohein Gadol makes a point to emphasize that it is not magical pagan-like ritual that fuels service of the day, but the tradition of Torah SheBaal Peh and the human creativity and contribution of rabbinic interpretation that serves as the ultimate source of authority. Our Avodah works and is accepted not because the physical actions carry absolute metaphysical meaning, but because these actions are part of a larger tradition, and place us at the heart of a chain of values and Torah that dates back to Aharon HaKohein on the very first Yom Kippur.

We will now conclude with the Kohein Gadol's prayer, followed by Maareh Kohein. I just want to call special attention to the end of the Kohein Gadol's prayer on page 604, as the ancient words of the Kohein Gadol ring true today.

שנה שתעצור המגפה והמשחית מעלינו ומעל כל עמך בית ישראל.

May it be a year in which God restrains the plague and destruction from upon us and upon all of Israel.

P. 606:

We just sang Maareh Kohein, as we embodied the ecstatic joy and celebration our forefathers felt as they saw the Kohein Gadol exit the sanctuary and knew that atonement had been granted. The joyous Maareh Kohein song details the beauty of the Kohein Gadol as he left the sanctuary unharmed. Many of the descriptions of the Kohein Gadol actually borrow biblical descriptions of God, either from Ezekiel's vision or from the flowery language of Shir HaShirim, suggesting that the true beauty of the Kohein Gadol was the lingering imprint of the divine that can just barely be made out reflecting upon the clouds of incense as the Kohein Gadol exits the holy of holies.

But while until now we have been living in a fantasy, fictionally reenacting the Temple service of old, now that we have finished, our fantastical mirage comes crumbling down. As we finish the Avodah, we are forced to confront the reality that, unlike our ancestors, we do not know that we have been granted atonement. We do not have the ritual comfort nor the communal comfort of the national Yom Kippur service. Immediately after the high highs of Maareh Kohein, we dramatically turn to the low lows of Chorban and destruction. The rough juxtaposition highlights the difficult turn, as we now cry out for all that we have lost.

P. 620

We now read the account of the ten martyrs, the Tanaitic leaders of the Jewish community who were sacrificed as punishment for the brother's sin of selling Joseph.

And indeed, in many ways the whole of Yom Kippur can be viewed from the lens of the sale of Joseph. While we already mentioned the shadow of the Golden Calf that hovers over Yom Kippur, serving as the paradigm of a violation of man's relationship with God, in many ways the sale of Yosef serves as the paradigm of man's violation of his relationship with fellow man. Our goat-based sacrifice rite parallels the actions of the brothers, as, after selling Yosef, they too slaughtered a goat and dipped into its blood. Indeed, Calum Carmichael, a Cornell Professor of Bible and Religion, claims that the Yom Kippur ritual was written drawing from the description and themes of the sale of Yosef towards the end of Bereishit.

Given that, the painful death of the ten martyrs serves as a reminder to the Jewish people that while they may give numerous sacrifices, and may pull off a beautiful Yom Kippur Avodah, if they do not rectify their relationships with each other, it won't be enough to save them. Yeshayahu's criticism of *Lamah Li Rov Zivcheichem*, why does God need all of your sacrifices, rings true, as the Jewish people's sin of *Sinat Chinam*, hatred and division, forces God to take his own sacrifices.

Unfortunately, this idea is all too common to us nowadays. Firstly, the idea of sacrifice and martyrdom is unfortunately still familiar. We all remember what happened in Pittsburgh, Berlin, Jerusalem, and countless other incidents around the world where we painfully and wrongfully lost our brethren and leaders. But more than that, the harsh reality that it is often only loss and persecution that can unite a divided Jewish people is a pain that is all too real today.

While anti-semitism is an an ever present threat and an important cause to combat, it is also appropriate now, as we are about to read how the martyrs lost their lives because of the competition of Yosef and his brothers, to lament the fact that it takes anti-semitism to unite the Jewish people. As we read through the painful and horrible history of the ten martyrs, we should be motivated to commit this year to fix our relationships and do what we can to make a Judaism that is united in its positive goals and vision for the world, and not just in its need for survival in the face of antisemitism.