

Yom Kippur during corona – Chapter II

Moshe Taragin

On the holiest day of the year-on Yom Kippur- we step back. Suppressing our routine, discarding food, and diminishing our sleep, we liberate our imagination to contemplate life, identity and future. Yom Kippur is a day of withdrawal, of religious awakening, spiritual cleansing and recoupling with G-d. Teshuva is timeless, stretching back to the beginning of history, when Man first sinned and was first accorded forgiveness by a merciful Creator. On this day of eternity, we join the generations of fallen humans who looked up to Heaven for redemption and for rebirth.

Though teshuva is timeless, it must be animated by the fluctuations of life. Each year must provoke a different variety of teshuva based upon our current experiences. So much has transpired over the past two years. How should Yom Kippur during year two of corona be flavored differently? How is this Yom Kippur different from other Yom Kippurs?

Bargaining with G-d

The process of teshuva includes tefila, viduy-confession, but also, bargaining. Somewhere along the journey to authentic teshuva, we arrive at a state of "recognition"- conceding our inadequacy while acknowledging that our many requests of G-d are undeserved. Somewhere along the journey of teshuva we face the harsh reality of possible punishment for our misconduct. At this stage we begin to bargain. We ask G-d to consider our untapped "potential" and not necessarily our paltry achievements. We may have failed miserably, but we are confident in our recovery potential and in our future success. In our negotiations with G-d we also ask Him to "factor in" our suffering or, as the gemara refers to them, our yisurin. The stresses of life have hampered our religious progress. Furthermore, we argue, we have already suffered the great toll of life and need no additional punishment. Life itself should be part of the Yom Kippur calculus in our frantic bargaining with G-d.

Prior to the Kol Nidre, many recite a soulful confession known as Tefillat Zakah – a somber prayer for purification. We beg G-d to consider the strain of raising a family or the pressures of earning a living- all of which may have distracted us from religious excellence. If the common pressures of life mitigate our Yom Kippur assessment, what is to be said about the toll of the corona epidemic? Some have lost more and some have lost less, but this pandemic has scrambled the arc of our lives and confounded our greatest ambitions. We ask G-d to look kindly upon us while taking the corona toll into account.

Standing Alone

Occurring a few days before Sukkot, Yom Kippur is often teamed with the chagim. By the time Yom Kippur arrives many of us are already in half-Sukkot mode. Though Yom Kippur shares several traits with general Yom Tov, it differs in a crucial aspect. Days of Yom Tov are national celebrations, commemorating framing events of Jewish history- from yetizat Mitzrayim, to receiving the Torah at Sinai, to the safe desert passage. Additionally, chagim serve as agricultural "mile-markers", denoting the passing of seasons. The historical echo and the agricultural resonance of the three chagim, are both experienced collectively. An entire nation jointly recalls the seminal moments which shaped our past, and the common agricultural drama which was jointly navigated. Three times a year throngs of Jews flock to "the mountain" for aliya l'regel and for national celebration.

Yom Kippur has no explicit historical antecedent nor is it associated with a particular agricultural moment. Unlike the collectivism of the chagim, Yom Kippur shines a spotlight on each individual soul. Just as Moshe stood on a solitary mountain, single-handedly praying for atonement, we stand alone before G-d confessing, tearing and longing for His response. Unlike the communal energy of the chagim, Yom Kippur is driven by the solitude of our individual spirit.

Over the past 70 years, Jewish consciousness has been animated by collective identity. Life in the Jewish state, is infused with a sense of national calling and of shared undertaking. Across the Jewish world, robust and sustainable communities have evolved, offering a rich texture of Jewish life. Sometimes strong national identity can distract us from personal struggle. We sometimes substitute "belonging" for

"becoming", communal affiliation for personal renovation. Yom Kippur restores the delicate balance between national destiny and personal identity.

Over the past two years we have spent much time "alone". This Yom Kippur we will be more "alone" than during typical years. Some will attend communal services and some will not even have that opportunity. Either way, our assembling will shrink we will all stand before G-d more privately and more quietly. Instead of ascending the mountain of Jewish history, we will descend into the silent abyss of our own soul searching for lost identity and bridging our way back to G-d. On this day of loneliness, we look for the comfort of G-d's embrace.

Panoramic Teshuva

Teshuva is often influenced or even compromised by "recency bias". We look back upon the past year, contemplating our recent victories and our latest failures. However, there is a different form of teshuva, which isn't telescopic but wide-ranging. A teshuva which doesn't micro-analyze our current self but which appraises the broader fabric of our lives. What has become of our dreams and of our ambitions? Which decisions have shaped our lives and which choices would we like to reverse? Which relationships have elicited our better selves and which have become emotionally broken? The gemara encourages us to confess past failures, effectively casting teshuva as a retrospective assessment of the totality of our lives. Classic teshuva should both deconstruct our current self but also reconstruct our former selves.

The past two years we have lived in the shadow of death. Confronting death calls attention to the fragility of life. Contemplating our mortality, invites a more sweeping teshuva and a broad-horizoned soul-searching. Corona teshuva should be more panoramic and less telescopic. It is now time to zoom out and track our lives.

Patience and Graciousness

Amidst the rich tapestry of Yom Kippur liturgy, only one prayer is Divinely authored. G-d Himself catalogued the thirteen middot of

rachamim- a record of thirteen Divine attributes, mandating their incorporation within our teshuva prayers. By reciting the catalog, we attempt to imitate these traits and become more G-d-like. By living more G-dly lives, we become greater beneficiaries of His mercy.

While various traits describe G-d's compassion and His love for us, the attribute of "erech apa'im" portrays Him as patient and slow to anger. He tolerates human failure, even bearing outright rebellion, all the while patiently awaiting repentance and improvement. As we whisper during Yom Kippur prayers: "ad yom moso t'chakeh lo (You wait for him [the sinner] even until the day he dies)".

Our stressful pandemic world has become very angry and our interpersonal relationships have become fractured. Shifting routines, uncertainty about the future and diminished social opportunities have increased our tension and anxiety levels. We sorely require more patience and more generosity of spirit. We badly need to be more like G-d in our tolerance and magnanimity. This trait of "erech apa'im" is the Heavenly attribute we desperately need more of on this battered earth. This year, more than any, we need to control our temper and extend our tolerance, and offer our spirit.

Gracious people, understand the frailty of the human condition and more easily accept the imperfections of others. Aware of the sad music of life they embrace a flawed world rather than judging or dismissing "blemished people". Our sickly world need more graciousness and longer patience.

Teshuva will heal us

The gemara extols teshuva as the healer of our world. In his landmark book of teshuva entitled Orot Hateshuva, Rav Kook viewed the healing powers of teshuva as a metaphor. To him, an aveirah is a cosmic deviation. The entire universe is constantly surging toward a more perfect state in which all reality-animate and inanimate- exists in harmony with the will of G-d and, consequently, with itself. If sin is a deviation, penitence or the repair of sin realigns or 'heals' a distorted world. Sin realigns a world gone awry.

For those of us living through this pandemic, the healing effects of

teshuva aren't just a metaphor. There is obviously something broken in our world- medically and, of course, spiritually. We strive, with G-d's help, to vanquish this outbreak and heal our world. However, our efforts will always be partial and temporary. The world will only be fully healed when history has concluded and been supernaturally redeemed. If we desire full healing it can only arrive with the redemption of history. Teshuva paves the road to redemption and the journey to a cured world.