

Reverberations

from the Beis Midrash:

Yom Tov Insights Adapted from Shiurim on the Marcos and Adina Katz YUTorah.org

Rosh Hashana as the Beginning of the Teshuva Process

The core theme of Rosh Hashana is coronating Hashem, declaring and accepting Him as the king. One way to coronate Hashem is through acts of kindness. The verse in Nechemiah 8:10, records the charge Nechemiah gave the Jewish people on Rosh Hashana (see Nechemiah 8:2):

וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶם לִכּוּ אֲכָלוּ מִשְׂמְנִים וּשְׂתוּ מִמֵּתֻקִּים וּשְׁלַחוּ מְנוֹת לְאֵין נֶכּוֹן לוֹ כִּי קָדוֹשׁ הַיּוֹם לְאֲדָנֵינוּ וְאֵל תִּעֲצְבוּ כִּי חֲדָתָה ה' הִיא מֵעַזְבְּכֶם.

He said to them: Go and eat delicacies, drink sweet drinks and send packages to those in need because today is holy to our Lord. Do not be sad because joy in G-d is your strength.

Why is Nechemiah insisting on sending packages to the needy on Rosh Hashana? Rav Hutner, *Pachad*

Yitzchok no. 1, writes that we see from Nechemiah that engaging in acts of kindness is an integral part of Rosh Hashana. Rav Hutner explains that *chesed* (kindness) is the basis for the creation of the world. Hashem created the world out of total kindness to humanity. If we want to coronate Hashem on Rosh Hashana, we have to show that we follow the values that Hashem's Kingdom was built on. We have to recognize that all of mankind was created in the image of Hashem and that Hashem wants all people to be the beneficiaries of kindness.

One of the verses we read in the *Malchuyos* section comes from *V'zos Haberacha* (Devarim 33:5):

וַיְהִי בִישׁרוֹן מֶלֶךְ בְּהַתְּאֵסֵף רֹאשֵׁי עַם יְחִיד וַיְבָטֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל.

And there was a king in Jeshurun, when the heads of the nation gathered, all of the tribes of Israel were together.



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The key word in this verse is *yachad*, together. If we want to coronate Hashem, we have to be unified. The Maharal, *Tiferes Yisrael* no. 21, writes that the first two commandments were given to all of the Jewish people together and not individually because without unity, there is no nation, and without a nation, Hashem cannot be a king. We achieve this unity by engaging in acts of kindness on Rosh Hashana and by committing to be kind people throughout the year.

This is also why there is a *minhag*, recorded in the *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch* 128:14, to ask forgiveness from our friends and family before Rosh Hashana. The *Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim* 606:1, writes that we should ask forgiveness from our friends and family before Yom Kippur. Asking for

forgiveness before Yom Kippur makes sense because we want to rid ourselves of all of our sins before Yom Kippur. If Rosh Hashana is not about our sins, why should we ask for forgiveness before Rosh Hashana? Perhaps the *minhag* to ask for forgiveness before Rosh Hashana serves a different

purpose. The purpose is to unify us, to make sure that each person is whole with everyone else. We are trying to create a sense of unity in order to coronate Hashem and in order to do that, everyone must put all of their gripes and grudges behind.

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The Freedom of Rosh Hashana

We know that Rosh Hashana is a special time of teshuva, of taking stock and attempting to improve. Why are these days different from the rest of the year? We know that we can do teshuva at any time.

The Gemara in *Rosh Hashana* (10b) says that on Rosh Hashana Yosef was freed from prison and was brought to see Pharoh. The *Shem M'Shmuel* (Rosh Hashana pg. 40) points out that Yosef is a designation that is applied to the Jewish people (we are referred to as the Bnei Yosef in Tehillim). There is a concept in chassidus that explains that as you go through the year, every day and every time-period has a particular energy. Rosh Hashana is a time of freedom, as illustrated by Yosef's

departure from the prison.

Throughout the year we may find ourselves in a "prison." Not one of fences and locked doors but an internal prison, which keeps us captive and prevents us from having complete freedom of choice. Internally, we are always constrained to a certain extent by our base instincts. The drives that lead us off the path of *avodas Hashem* are impediments to our achievement of perfection in our spiritual lives. We also live in a culture that is, in many ways, antithetical to the values of the Torah, and we cannot completely escape the influences of our surroundings.

However, on Rosh Hashana a Jew can access the energy of freedom that is linked to the day of Rosh Hashana itself. By accessing this special energy, we can achieve complete freedom as we attempt to return to Hashem



b'teshuva shleima. It is on these days, and during this time of year, that we can truly have complete freedom of choice and can make the right decisions and resolutions that can set us off on a trajectory of spiritual growth for the new year ahead.

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Gadol Worship and the Avodah of Yom Kippur: The Importance of Visualizing Success

Beginning on Rosh Chodesh Elul we begin a tekufah during which we are hyper-focused on the concept of repentance. The days of the Elul and the beginning of Tishrei are referred to as *yemei hadin* and it is during this time of year that we reflect on our past conduct and attempt to repent for any wrongdoing we may have perpetrated over the previous year.

Interestingly, the Mussaf of Yom Kippur, the focal point of the day's tefillah, is not focused on individual teshuvah or on one of the more fundamental themes of the day. It is solely focused on the *avodah* of the Kohein Gadol in the *Kodesh Hakodashim* on Yom Kippur. We punctuate this part of the day's *avodah* with the popular piyyut *Mareh Kohein* which is usually sung to a joyous tune with enthusiastic participation from the congregation.

There is another peculiarity related to the entirety of the *avodah* that was performed throughout the day of Yom

Kippur including those that were daily and not unique to Yom Kippur. While the regular routine daily korbanos could be brought by a regular Kohein on other days of the year, on Yom Kippur all of the *avodah* was performed by the Kohein Gadol.

Why the emphasis on the Kohein Gadol on Yom Kippur? What about Yom Kippur and the character of the day demand the exclusive participation of the Kohein Gadol? Why, when we are so focused on personal introspection and spiritual growth, do we find the focus on one individual's actions?

The image of the Kohein Gadol on Yom Kippur, who is completely engrossed and dedicated to *avodas Hashem* is meant to inspire us. We even sing a song at the crescendo of the day's tefillos that describes in vivid detail the resplendent visage of the Kohein Gadol as he successfully completed the day's *avodah*.

On Yom Kippur, as we prepare ourselves for a year of spiritual growth and successful *avodas Hashem*, we need a vision of success in this realm. We are provided with a role model of what dedication to the service of God looks like and we are meant to take that imagery from the *yemei hadin* with us



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for the rest of the year.

Rather than focus on our past failings and leave the *yemei hadin* solely with the fear of future mistakes, we instead gaze upon the Kohein Gadol's regal countenance as he departs from a successful day of service in the *Kodesh Hakodashim*. We should all aim to emulate that dedication and commitment as we go through the ebb and flow of our daily lives. We live lives that are structured and centered around *avodas Hashem* and opportunities to fulfill the *ratzon Hashem*. We too can gain the holy glow that the Kohein Gadol acquired as he went through the Yom Kippur *avodah* so that when people see us involved in mitzvos they'll say "*mareh Kohein*."

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Aseret Yemei Tefillah?

It is striking that during Aseres Yemei Teshuva, when our focus should be on doing teshuva and consequently, we would think that we should be spending time in introspection, analyzing our actions and motivations, and we would have little time for quiet contemplation. Ostensibly during Aseres Yemei Teshuva we spend more time davening than we do all year. Our tefillos are

lengthened with Selichos, and Avinu Malkeinu. Why is this so? Why don't we assign a fixed time for contemplation or mussar study? Why do we in effect have Aseres Yemei Tefilla rather than Aseres Yemei Teshuva.

I believe that the answer to this question lies in an inference in the Rambam's language of *viduy*. Rambam (*Teshuva* 1:1) notes that one who recites *viduy* is "*misvadeh lifnei haKel*



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Baruch Hu” confesses in the presence of Gd. This focus on *viduy* in the presence of Hashem can mean many things. However, on its most basic level, it means that our *viduy* is meant to bring us in the presence of Hashem. Sin distances us from Hashem; *viduy* draws us back (see Rambam *Teshuva* 7:6).

It is worth noting that Rav Chaim, in his sefer on the Rambam notes that the fundamental element of davening is our awareness (*kavana*) that we stand before Hashem. Other forms of intent and concentration are not as critical; the sense that we stand in the presence of Hashem is. I maintain that

for this reason we spend *Aseres Yemei Teshuva* engaged in *tefilla*. The goal of our *teshuva*, as articulated by the Navi Hoshea is to return to Hashem. What better way to reconnect to Hashem than through *tefilla*?

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The Avodah of Neilah: Loving Hashem

There is a concept introduced in *Maseches Yoma* 85b, that *kapparah* (atonement) happens in different ways and at different paces for different transgressions. These differences all fit within the general framework of repentance but there are nuanced differences in the exact achievement of *kapparah* from sin to sin.

Although the gates of *teshuva* are open all year long, there is a greater level of receptiveness to our repentance during the days of Elul and Tishrei. The general hierarchy of repentance, the nuanced differentiation between ways in which one achieves *kapparah* for their transgressions seem to fall by the wayside as well and it's as if our repentance for all our sins is accepted in the same way and at the same time.

What is it about Yom Kippur that seems to supersede the regular functioning of the repentance process?

The *Meshech Chochma* (Vayikra 16:30) writes that there is a special power that the conclusion of the day of Yom Kippur has that is fundamentally different than any other day of the year.

The final hours of Yom Kippur, when we recite *neilah*, seem to be a time that possesses an unmatched level of heavenly openness to our repentance.

The *Minchas Chinuch* (364:35) explores the repentance of the rest of the year. When a person does repentance in the middle of the year their *teshuva* is simply a “band-aid” that covers over the sin but there is still some remnant of that transgression, that is why some sins require additional components of repentance before one achieves complete *kapparah*. However, there is a form of *teshuva* that completely wipes out the sin and could even transform our *aveiros* into *zechuyos*. When one does *teshuvah me'ahava*, repentance out of love, the general rules of repentance or bypassed and the repentant person is entirely forgiven.

When we recite *neilah*, during the waning moments of Yom Kippur the demeanor in heaven is one of complete *rachamim*. The trait of strict judgement, which had been present since the beginning of the Yamim Noraim is supplanted by an outpouring of Hashem's mercy. It is in this context that one can truly tap into a sincere *teshuva me'ahava*. It is not



something that can be accomplished in the moment. We must constantly work on enhancing our *ahavat Hashem* to reach the level where *neilah's* power can be unlocked. By constantly working to deepen our understanding of Hashem and His ways we can reveal some of the endless power and splendor of Hashem. As we reflect on the blessing we each have in our lives and contemplate the profundity of Hashem's creation we will undoubtedly develop an even deeper love for Hashem which will grant us the complete repentance of *neilah* and the conclusion of Yom Kippur.

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