

# TRANSFORMING **DAYS OF AWE** INTO **DAYS OF LOVE**

Imagine the following scene: a man leaves home on a Purim morning only to shortly thereafter return in the guise of a bear. His young son, failing to recognize that it is none other than his own father, fearfully runs to his mother to inform her of the “bear” that is lurking in the adjacent room. The mother attempts to soothe the child by revealing that the “scary bear” is none other than “Abba.” In an ironic display of childish understanding mixed with unresolved fear, the child swiftly returns to his father in costume, and cries out with a heartfelt and desperate plea: “Abba, Abba! Father! Please save me from the bear!”

I have often thought of this humorous yet poignant anecdote as so perfectly capturing the complexity and range

of our emotions in the months of Elul and Tishrei.<sup>1</sup> It is difficult to precisely define the essential nature of these days. Yamim Noraim, literally awe-filled days, project a heaviness of the impending judgment. And yet upon closer inspection, one marvels as the *middas hadin* curiously blends with the tender embrace of Hashem in these aptly called *Yimei Ratzon*.

The early 11th-century Spanish paytan, Shlomo Ibn Gabirol, in his piyyut “*Keser Malchus*”<sup>2</sup> poetically captures this paradoxical posture. As one struggles to approach Hashem during these precious days of teshuva, he describes the feeling of, *evrach Mimeka Eilecha*, — “I flee from You, to You.”<sup>3</sup> Fear of acknowledging our shortcomings and failures while simultaneously dreaming



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of new beginnings pulls our heart and our very being in opposite directions.

The *halachos, minhagim* and liturgy of Elul, Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur seek to guide us through conflicting emotions and varied expressions.

Should we fear or rejoice? We shudder from the piercing cry of the shofar yet dress in pure white garments projecting our confidence in the outcome of our trial. Should we feast or should we fast? Is a tear-drenched siddur commendable or at least justifiable?

The path to teshuva appears contradictory. The Torah presents the teshuva process as easily accessible, inviting and within reach. Hashem cajoles us with His words:

לֹא בַשָּׁמַיִם הוּא לֵאמֹר מִי יַעֲלֶה לָנוּ הַשָּׁמַיִם  
וְיִקַּח לָנוּ וְיִשְׁמַענוּ אֶתְּהָ וְנִשְׁשָׁנָה. וְלֹא מֵעַבְרָ  
לַיָּם הוּא לֵאמֹר מִי יַעֲבֹר לָנוּ אֶל עֵבֶר הַיָּם  
וְיִקַּח לָנוּ וְיִשְׁמַענוּ אֶתְּהָ וְנִשְׁשָׁנָה. כִּי קְרוֹב  
אֵלֶיךָ הַדְּבָר מְאֹד בְּפִיךָ וּבִלְבָבְךָ לַעֲשׂוֹתוֹ.

*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?" 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?" No, the thing is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to observe it. (Devarim 30:12-14).*

On the other hand, Rambam (*Hilchos Teshuva* 2:2) sets the bar incredibly high when he codifies proper teshuvah as a transformation of self to such a degree that, "He Who knows the hidden will testify concerning him that he will never return to this sin again." One wonders if anyone can rise to endure such a level of spiritual scrutiny.

Ultimately, we are left grappling with the question: How are we expected to see ourselves throughout this process? In an oft-quoted refrain from the Rosh Hashana davening we verbally raise this very question: *im ki'banim, im ki'avadim* — are we seen as beloved children, as indentured servants or perhaps a strange hybrid of both?

While this inner disharmony certainly

can create discomfort, one need not seek to "solve" or resolve this feeling of mixed emotions. A wholesome Jewish heart has the wherewithal to contain multiple emotions, sometimes even conflicting ones. The *Zohar HaKadosh*<sup>4</sup> acknowledges that for a spiritually mature spirit, it is entirely possible to live authentically with "Weeping lodged in one side of my heart, and joy lodged in the other."<sup>5</sup> This is perhaps, in part, the intent of the Mishna (*Berachos* 9:5) in explaining the Torah's directive to serve Hashem with "All of our heart" (*Devarim* 6:5, 10:12).<sup>6</sup>

Nothing captures the potency of this duality quite like the emotionally charged tefillah of Avinu Malkeinu — our Father, our King. It was in fact Rabbi Akiva (see *Taanis* 25b) who invoked this description of Hashem when petitioning Hashem for much-needed rain to end a stifling drought. While the Gemara attributes the success of Rabbi Akiva's tefillah to his refined character, particularly his forgiving nature, one cannot overlook the fact that it was specifically the use of the term Avinu Malkeinu which enabled him to stir the heavens.<sup>7</sup>

While the phrase Avinu Malkeinu paints an image of a steady balance between a loving parent and a demanding king, it is ultimately the parent-child relationship that creates the possibility of spiritual recovery through the teshuva process.

The *Bnei Yissaschar*<sup>8</sup> (Rav Tzvi Elimelech of Dinov zy" a [1783-1841]) cites a midrash<sup>9</sup> which notes that teshuvah is only effective for the Jewish

people and not for any other nation of the world.<sup>10</sup> In explanation of the midrash, *Bnei Yissaschar* highlights a critical distinction: while a Jew relates to Hashem as a child to a parent (i.e. Avinu), the remainder of humanity relates to Hashem solely as King. Our sages teach that while a king cannot forgo his honor,<sup>11</sup> a parent is granted such authority by the Torah to exempt a child from the expected displays of honor.<sup>12</sup> As such, the forgiveness and pardoning that teshuvah offers is viable only in the context of a parent-child relationship. As children of Hashem (*Devarim* 14:1; *Shemos* 4:22) we are uniquely granted this privilege of having our sins erased and our "script" rewritten. Make no mistake: we too serve as subjects in Hashem's palace and vast kingdom of creation. Yet it is Avinu, rather than Malkeinu, that opens the door to restoring ourselves and rectifying the tainted relationship.

When we turn our attention to the concluding Mishna of *Meseches Yoma* (8:9), we are not surprised to once again encounter the centrality of the parent-child relationship in the cleansing process of teshuva. Rabbi Akiva returns, with his positive and hopeful outlook, to remind us of the blessing and privilege of being the children of Hashem.

אמר רבי עקיבא: אשריכם ישראל, לפני מי אתם משהרין, ומי משהר אתכם? אביכם שבשמים.

*Rabbi Akiva said: How fortunate are you, Yisrael; before Whom are you purified, and Who purifies you? It is your Father in Heaven!*

**A wholesome Jewish heart has the wherewithal to contain multiple emotions, sometimes even conflicting ones.**



With the resounding cry of “*Ha’melech!*” from the Rosh Hashana davening still echoing in the distance, it is “*Avinu She’ba’shamayim*” who lovingly purifies His children as the sun sets on the horizon in the closing moments of Yom Kippur.

Similarly, in the end of days, as Chazal speak of a chaotic downward spiral and a crumbling societal world order, we recognize that there is but one relationship that will shield us and protect us until *geulah* arrives: *Avinu She’ba’shamayim*.

בעקבות משיחא חוצפא יסגא, ויוקר יאמיר  
 ... והמלכות תהפך למינות ... בית ועד יהיה  
 לזנות ... והכמת סופרים תסרה, ויראי חטא  
 ימאסו, והאמת תהא נעדרת. נערים פני זקנים  
 ילבינו, זקנים יעמדו מפני קטנים. (מיכה ז)  
 בן מנבל אב, בת קמה באמה, כלה בחמותה,  
 אויבי איש אנשי ביתו. פני הדור כפני הכלב,  
 הבן אינו מתבייש מאביו. ועל מי יש לנו  
 להשען? על אבינו שבשמים.

*In the times of the approach of the Messiah, impudence will increase and high costs will pile up... the monarchy shall turn to heresy... The meeting place of the Sages will become a place of promiscuity... And the wisdom of scribes will putrefy, and people who fear sin will be held in disgust, and the truth will be absent. The youth will shame the face of elders... Normal family relations will be ruined... A man’s enemies will be the members of his household. The face of the generation will be like the face of a dog; a son will no longer be ashamed*

*before his father. And upon what is there for us to rely? Only upon our Father in heaven. (Sotah 9:15)*

As we navigate the final chapters of world history and transition from a year marked by the pain of loss and the hardship of war to a year we hope will be filled with revealed blessing, *Avinu Malkeinu* “reminds” Hashem (and more importantly ourselves), that just beneath the surface of the “scary costume” is our loving Father longing for our closeness and connection. May we merit this year to remove the mask once and for all and bask in His warm embrace.

## Endnotes

1. Rav Shimshon Pinkus *zt”l* (*Sichos R. Shimshon Pinkus zt”l, Galus UNechama* pg. 33) shares this story to expound on the pasuk, “*He is a lurking bear to me, A lion in hiding*” (Eichah 3:10) when discussing the palpable absence of the Shechinah in our midst resulting from the loss of Beis Hamikdash. See as well *Sichos R. Shimshon Pinkus zt”l, Elul* pg. 11 where he discusses a conversation between Rav Yisrael Salanter and an inquisitive Jew who asked Rav Salanter why he feared Elul so greatly. “Is Elul a bear that you should fear?” Rav Salanter explained (based on pesukim in both Shmuel I and Tehillim) that days of Divine judgement are in fact more frightening than a bear!
2. Recited by some communities, primarily Sefardim, on Yom Kippur.
3. See the Rambam, *Peirush HaMishna* to the Mishna, *Rosh Hashana* 32b who similarly writes: לפי שהם ימי עבודה והכנעה ופחד ומורא

מהשם ויראה ממנו ומברח ומנוס אליו. Some suggest the Rambam had the words of Ibn Gabirol in mind when using such a phrase.

4. Zohar Vol 2, daf 255a; volume 3, daf 75a.
5. This passage is referenced and discussed in the *Tanya* (end of Chapter 34; *Iggeres HaTeshuvah* chapter 11).
6. See *Berachos* 61a which compares the evil inclination to a fly that sits between the two entrances of the heart. This suggests, allegorically, that the *yetzer hara* seeks to divide the heart and create tension between the seemingly opposite emotions of weeping and rejoicing. There is much nuance to be explored here in defining *yirah*. See Rav Soloveitchik’s *And From There You Shall Seek* (p. 67) who notes that, “fear and love are mutually contradictory, but awe and love do not negate each other.” A full treatment of this issue is beyond the scope of this essay.
7. We are reminded as well of the story of Rabbi Akiva and his contemporaries (*Makkos* 24b) overlooking the destruction of the Second Beis Hamikdash. As his fellow tannaim wept at the sight of a fox emerging from the Kodosh Hakadoshim, Rabbi Akiva’s broad soul and deeper perspective allowed him to laugh amidst the tears.
8. *Maamarei Elul*, 1:6
9. He cites *Sifrei*; see *Midrash Tanchuma* to *Haazinu*.
10. One might suggest, in light of the story of *Sefer Yonah*, that while a superficial degree of teshuva is indeed possible for gentiles, the fullest fulfillment of teshuva is only offered to the Jewish people.
11. *Kesubos* 17a.
12. *Kiddushin* 32a.

Learn more about the laws  
 and meaning of *Avinu  
 Malkeinu* on the Marcos &  
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