YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**YHE-HOLIDAY: SPECIAL YOM KIPPUR 5777 PACKAGE**

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**In honor of our mother Mrs. Diana Weiner, with all our love and gratitude and with best wishes for a shana tov u-metuka!  
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**A Heavenly Voice on Yom Kippur**

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Translated by Kaeren Fish

It is a positive commandment from the Torah that a person rouse his spirit to repent on Yom Kippur, as it says, “that you may be purified from all your sins before the Lord” (Lev. 16:30). Accordingly, Scripture commanded us that we should purify ourselves before God with our repentance and He will atone for us on this day to purify us. (Rabbenu Yona, *Shaarei Teshuva*, ch. I I)

The mitzva of repentance on Yom Kippur is a special one, different from the mitzva of repentance during the year. Repentance of Yom Kippur leads not only to uplift and drawing close to God, but also a change in priorities. We reconsider what is really important in our lives.

The general mitzva of repentance is “that the sinner turns from his sin before God and confesses” (heading of Rambam’s *Laws of Repentance*). The repentance of Yom Kippur includes another dimension: purification. The usual process of repentance is a gradual one, accomplished a little bit at a time, while the repentance of Yom Kippur is like a person immersing himself in a mikve and emerging purified, all at once. The Midrash (Genesis Rabba 75:1) compares this to a chicken shaking off dust, in an instant leaving all its filth behind. That is the repentance of Yom Kippur, a repentance of purification.

Of course, this presents a difficulty: can a person be purified all at once, in a single day? A well-known *baraita* of R. Pinchas ben Yair (Avoda Zara 20b) teaches that purity is achieved only after one has acquired the traits of prudence, alacrity, cleanliness, and abstemiousness. Ramchal, in *Mesillat Yesharim* (ch. 16), defines the essence of purity as “perfection of one’s heart and thoughts.” How, then, can purity be achieved through an accelerated, one-time process? A person surely asks himself, “Is it possible that I – a mortal who comes from dust and will return to dust – can really stand and be purified before God?”

The answer is that on Yom Kippur God Himself comes to our aid: “For on that day He will forgive you, to purify you, that you may be purified from all your sins before the Lord” (Lev. 16:30). The Holy One, blessed be He, declares that if the Children of Israel wish to be cleansed, He will help them. In this verse the Torah sets down the purpose of this holy day: purification before God. This purification before God on Yom Kippur is both an obligation and a promise.

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Yom Kippur is a day unlike any other. Needless to say, it is not like a regular weekday, but even among the holidays it is unique. The Midrash teaches:

“The days in which they are to be fashioned, and for it too there was one of them” (Ps. 139:16) – R. Yehoshua said, “Out of the days that the Holy One, blessed be He, created, He chose one of them. And which is it? Yom Kippur, as it is written, ‘Is not this the fast that I have chosen?’ (Is. 58:6).” (Tanchuma, *Bereshit* 28)

Elsewhere we find:

The solar year comprises 365 days. The numerical value of *HaSatan* (“Satan”) is 364, for Satan makes accusations throughout the year except on Yom Kippur. (Leviticus Rabba 21:4)

The uniqueness of Yom Kippur is reflected in different ways. For example, the Torah commands us to sound the shofar on Yom Kippur in a Jubilee year, thereby announcing the freeing of Hebrew indentured slaves. There is no more appropriate day for this blowing of the shofar than Yom Kippur. A servant whose ear has been pierced serves his master until the Jubilee year. *Chazal* criticize the willingness of the servant to attach himself in this way to his master and remain in his home, as we learn in the Gemara:

[Why is the ear of the servant to be pierced?] The Holy One, blessed be He, said, “The ear that heard My voice at Mt. Sinai, when I said, ‘For the Children of Israel are servants to Me’ (Lev. 25:55) – and not servants of servants, but nevertheless this one went and acquired a master for himself – let that ear be pierced.” (Kiddushin 22b)

Let us not forget that when the servant chose to have his ear pierced and remain in servitude, he had nothing of his own to eat, nothing to wear, and no place to sleep! Nevertheless, he is criticized for making himself a servant to a fellow Jew. He should have been ready to suffer hunger and deprivation, but remain a servant of God alone.

On Yom Kippur in the Jubilee year, even this servant goes free. However, just freeing him is not enough, for what will it help for him to be free if mentally he remains a servant? There is only one day in the year when he will be able to hear the true message of freedom: “‘For the Children of Israel are servants to Me’ – and not servants of servants.” On Yom Kippur every Jew is required to hear that divine call: they are servants to Me, not to other servants.

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A different heavenly voice that is heard on Yom Kippur is the one Elisha ben Avuya heard: the voice calling, “Return, return, O wayward children” (Jer. 3:22). The Talmud Yerushalmi recounts that R. Meir asked Elisha ben Avuya why he did not repent. The latter replies:

I cannot…. Once I was passing before the Holy of Holies, riding on my horse on Yom Kippur, which fell on Shabbat, when I heard a heavenly voice emanating from the Holy of Holies and saying, “Return, children – except for Elisha ben Avuya, who knew My power, and yet rebelled against Me.” (Y. Chagiga 2:1)

It is no coincidence that Elisha ben Avuya heard that heavenly voice specifically on Yom Kippur. On this day one hears great and meaningful voices, the voices of repentance.

What was Elisha ben Avuya’s mistake? It seems that he misunderstood the meaning of the heavenly voice that said, “except for Elisha ben Avuya.” The heavenly voice spoke for a reason; it was intended to rouse him to persist, to overcome, to make an effort. The heavens wanted Elisha ben Avuya to repent “mightily,” in the sense of “let them cry mightily to God, and let them turn everyone from his evil way” (Jonah 3:8).

“Mighty” repentance can break down walls; it refuses to be relegated “outside the fence.” The Gemara teaches (Pesachim 86b, according to some versions, see *Be’ur Halakha* 170:5) that a guest must obey any instruction from his host, unless he tells him, “Leave!” The Shelah (*Shaar HaOtiyot*, *Emek Berakha* 23; cited also in *Peri Tzaddik*, *Miketz* 2) explains that, in a similar way, if a heavenly voice decrees, “Get out of My house” – the same message that Elisha ben Avuya heard – one should not obey, but rather enter, in repentance.

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If a person is fortunate enough to open his heart on Yom Kippur, the heart beating in repentance and longing to return to God, then his heart will echo with that heavenly voice calling, “Return, return, O wayward children.” But even someone who is heartbroken because he does not feel the atmosphere of the day, because his heart is closed to repentance – he should know that even broken-heartedness contains something of that same distant heavenly voice. That voice calls to him, “Go and call mightily to God,” exert yourself, persist, and overcome, for His hand is outstretched to accept those who repent. One who is sad because he is not moved to repent should seek the gate of repentance that suits him – the gate of those who are in distress:

When you are in distress and all these things have come upon you, in the latter days, if you turn to the Lord your God and obey His voice… (Deut. 4:30)

Through this gate passed one of the greatest sinners that ever lived – Menashe, king of Judea:

So Menashe caused Judea and the inhabitants of Jerusalem to go astray, to do worse than the nations which the Lord had destroyed before the Children of Israel. And the Lord spoke to Menashe and to his people, but they would not listen. So that the Lord brought upon them the captains of the host of the king of Assyria, who took Menashe among the thorns, and bound him with fetters, and carried him to Babylonia. And when he was in affliction, he besought the Lord his God, and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers. And he prayed to Him and He received his entreaty, and heard his supplication, and brought him back to Jerusalem, into his kingdom. Then Menashe knew that the Lord was God.” (I I Chr. 33:9–13)

The Talmud Yerushalmi elaborates:

When he saw that he was beset by troubles, there was not a single form of idolatry in the world to which he did not appeal.

When none of this helped him, he said, “I remember that my father used to read me this verse in the synagogue: ‘ When you are in distress and all these things have come upon you, in the latter days, if you turn to the Lord your God and obey His voice, for the Lord your God is a merciful God, He will not forsake you, nor will He destroy you, nor forget the covenant of your fathers, which He swore to them’ (Deut. 4:30–31). So I will read it; if He answers me, well and good; if not – then all gods are the same.” And the ministering angels tried to close the windows [of heaven] so that Menashe’s prayer would not rise up before the Holy One, blessed be He, and they said to God, “Master of the world – someone who has worshipped idols and placed an image in the Temple, shall You accept his repentance?” He said to them,

“If I do not accept his repentance, then I am closing the door on all who seek repentance.” What did God do? He bored a hole under His Throne of Glory, and heard Menashe’s supplication.

And this is as it is written, “And he prayed to Him and He received his entreaty, and heard his supplication, and brought him back to Jerusalem, into his kingdom.” (Y. Sanhedrin 10:2)

When he hits bottom, Menashe remembers this verse and is fortunate to have God bore a hole under His Throne of Glory. This is the repentance that breaks through gates, the repentance of Yom Kippur, which brings with it purification: “that you may be purified … before the Lord.” Every one of us should feel that “distress,” both on the personal level and the national level pertaining to all of Israel. This sense of “when you are in distress” takes hold of us also with regard to the students of the yeshiva who perished. The Holy One, blessed be He, opens the gate to those who knock in repentance; let us therefore knock with all our hearts.

[This sicha is excerpted from Rav Amital’s book, [*When God Is Near: On the High Holidays*](https://www.korenpub.com/maggid_en_usd/when-god-is-near.html) (Maggid, 2015).]