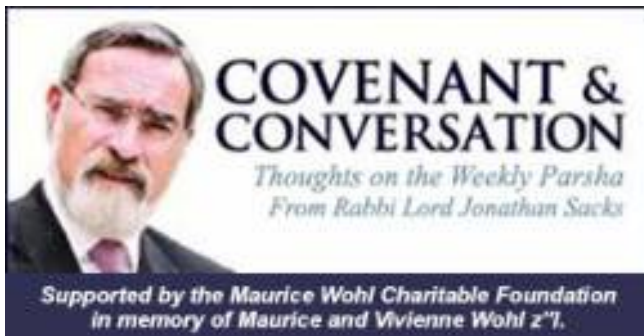


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### Sprints and Marathons

It was a unique, unrepeatable moment of leadership at its highest height. For forty days Moses had been communing with God, receiving from Him the Law written on tablets of stone. Then God informed him that the people had just made a Golden Calf. He would have to destroy them. It was the worst crisis of the wilderness years, and it called for every one of Moses' gifts as a leader.

First, he prayed to God not to destroy the people. God agreed. Then he went down the mountain and saw the people cavorting around the Calf.

Immediately, he smashed the tablets. He burned the Calf, mixed its ashes with water and made the people drink. Then he called for people to join him. The Levites heeded the call and carried out a bloody punishment in which three thousand people died. Then Moses went back up the mountain and prayed for forty days and nights. Then for a further forty days he stayed with God while a new set of tablets was engraved. Finally, he came down the mountain on the tenth of Tishri, carrying the new tablets with him as a visible sign that God's covenant with Israel remained.

This was an extraordinary show of leadership, at times bold and decisive, at others slow and persistent. Moses had to contend with both sides, inducing the Israelites to do *teshuvah* and God to exercise forgiveness. At that moment he was the greatest ever embodiment of the name Israel, meaning one who wrestles with God and with people and prevails.

The good news is: there once was a Moses. Because of him, the people survived. The bad news is: what happens when there is no Moses? The Torah itself says: "No other Prophet has risen in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face" (Deut. 34:10). What do you do in the absence of heroic leadership? That is the problem faced by every nation, corporation, community and family. It is easy to think, "What would Moses do?" But Moses did what he did because he was what he was. We are not Moses. That is why every human group that was once touched by greatness faces a problem of continuity. How does it avoid a slow decline?

The answer is given in this week's parsha. The day Moses descended the mountain with the second tablets was to be immortalised when its anniversary became the holiest of days, Yom Kippur. On this day, the drama of *teshuvah* and *kapparah*, repentance and atonement, was to be repeated annually. This time, though, the key figure would not be Moses but Aaron, not the Prophet but the High Priest.

That is how you perpetuate a transformative event: by turning it into a ritual. Max Weber called this the routinisation of charisma.<sup>1</sup> A once-and-never-again moment becomes a once-and-ever-again ceremony. As James MacGregor Burns puts it in his classic work, *Leadership*: "The most lasting tangible act of leadership is the creation of an institution – a nation, a social movement, a political party, a bureaucracy – that continues to exert moral leadership and foster needed social change long after the creative leaders are gone."<sup>2</sup>

There is a remarkable Midrash in which various Sages put forward their idea of *klal gadol ba-Torah*, "the great principle of the Torah." Ben Azzai says it is the verse, "This is the book of the chronicles of man: On the day that God created man, He made him in the likeness of God" (Gen. 5:1). Ben Zoma says that there is a more embracing principle, "Listen, Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one." Ben Nannas says there is a yet more embracing principle: "Love your neighbour as yourself." Ben Pazzi says we find a more embracing principle still: "The first sheep shall be offered in the morning, and the second sheep in the afternoon" (Exodus 29:39) – or, as we might say today, Shacharit, Mincha and

Maariv. In a word: "routine". The passage concludes: The law follows Ben Pazzi.<sup>3</sup>

The meaning of Ben Pazzi's statement is clear: all the high ideals in the world – the human person as God's image, belief in God's unity, and the love of neighbours – count for little until they are turned into habits of action that become habits of the heart. We can all recall moments of insight or epiphany when we suddenly understood what life is about, what greatness is, and how we would like to live. A day, a week, or at most a year later the inspiration fades and becomes a distant memory and we are left as we were before, unchanged.

Judaism's greatness is that it gave space to both Prophet and Priest, to inspirational figures on the one hand, and on the other, daily routines – the *halachah* – that take exalted visions and turn them into patterns of behaviour that reconfigure the brain and change how we feel and who we are.

One of the most unusual passages I have ever read about Judaism written by a non-Jew occurs in William Rees-Mogg's book on macro-economics, *The Reigning Error*.<sup>4</sup> Rees-Mogg (1928-2012) was a financial journalist who became editor of *The Times*, chairman of the Arts Council and vice-chairman of the BBC. Religiously he was a committed Catholic.

He begins the book with a completely unexpected paean of praise for halachic Judaism. He explains his reason for doing so. Inflation, he says, is a disease of inordinacy, a failure of discipline, in this case in relation to money. What makes Judaism unique, he continues, is its legal system.

This has been wrongly criticised by Christians as drily legalistic. In fact, Jewish law was essential for Jewish survival because it “provided a standard by which action could be tested, a law for the regulation of conduct, a focus for loyalty and a boundary for the energy of human nature.”

All sources of energy, most notably nuclear energy, need some form of containment. Without this, they become dangerous. Jewish law has always acted as a container for the spiritual and intellectual energy of the Jewish people. That energy “has not merely exploded or been dispersed; it has been harnessed as a continuous power.” What Jews have, he argues, modern economies lack: a system of self-control that allows economies to flourish without booms and crashes, inflation and recession.

The same applies to leadership. In *Good to Great*, management theorist Jim Collins argues that what the great companies have in common is a *culture of discipline*. In *Great By Choice*, he uses the phrase “the 20-Mile March” meaning that outstanding organisations plan for the marathon, not the sprint. Confidence, he says, “comes not from motivational speeches, charismatic inspiration, wild pep rallies, unfounded optimism, or blind hope.”<sup>5</sup> It comes from doing the deed, day after day, year after year. Great companies use disciplines that are specific, methodical and consistent. They encourage their people to be self-disciplined and responsible. They do not over-react to change, be it for good or bad. They keep their eye on the far horizon. Above all, they do not depend on heroic, charismatic leaders who at best lift the company for a while but do not

provide it with the strength-in-depth they need to flourish in the long run.

The classic instance of the principles articulated by Burns, Rees-Mogg and Collins is the transformation that occurred between Ki Tissa and Acharei Mot, between the first Yom Kippur and the second, between Moses’ heroic leadership and the quiet, understated priestly discipline of an annual day of repentance and atonement.

Turning ideals into codes of action that shape habits of the heart is what Judaism and leadership are about. Never lose the inspiration of the Prophets, but never lose, either, the routines that turn ideals into acts and dreams into achieved reality.

#### **AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE**

1. How is Jewish Law a container for the spiritual and intellectual energy of the Jewish people?
2. Are you surprised that Ben Pazzi’s principle is viewed as the greatest in the Torah, or does it make sense to you?
3. How can you find inspiration in consistent, daily ritual and routine?

#### **NOTES**

1. See Max Weber, *Economy and Society* (Oakland, Calif.: University of California Press, 1978), 246ff.
2. James MacGregor Burns, *Leadership* (New York: Harper, 1978), 454.
3. The passage is cited in the Introduction to the commentary HaKotev to *Ein Yaakov*, the collected aggadic passages of the Talmud. It is also quoted by Maharal in *Netivot Olam, Ahavat Re’a 1*.
4. William Rees-Mogg, *The Reigning Error: The Crisis of World Inflation* (London: Hamilton, 1974), 9–13.
5. Jim Collins, *Good to Great* (New York: HarperBusiness, 2001); *Great by Choice* (New York: HarperCollins, 2011), 55.



### A Holy, Delicate Land

Perhaps reading the parasha from a post-Pesach perspective impacts what we see, but there are one or two comments in this week's parasha that are particularly apt for this time of year - after the seder, when all of us felt as if we had been redeemed from Egypt.

The book of Vayikra is almost completely devoid of chronological and geographical reference points, giving the book a certain feel of timelessness. Nonetheless, we do know that the context, both geographically and historically, is somewhere between Egypt and the Promised Land:

Do not follow the ways of the Land of Egypt where you lived, nor of the Land of Canaan, where I will be bringing you. Do not follow [any] of their customs. (Vayikra 18:3)

As an introduction to a set of laws that create a new morality, the Torah warns against the practices of these depraved nations, and then proceeds to list forbidden sexual relations and practices. At the end of the list, an additional consideration is introduced: Not only are these behaviors wrong from the Torah's perspective, but

the Land of Israel - the Holy Land - cannot tolerate depravity of this sort:

Do not let yourselves be defiled by any of these acts. It was as a result of these behaviors that the nations that I am driving away before you became defiled. The land became defiled, and I held them responsible for the sins committed there, and the Land vomited out its inhabitants... The people who lived in the land before you did all these disgusting perversions and defiled the land. But [you shall not cause] the land to vomit you out by defiling it, as it vomited out the nation that was there before you. (Vayikra 18:24-28)

There is a price to be paid for holiness; the spiritual constitution of the Land of Israel cannot tolerate sin - certainly not certain types of sin. It was this profound holiness, reflected in the laws unique to the Land of Israel (particularly the agricultural laws, designed to create a more caring and cohesive society) that scared off many a settler throughout the centuries. "Am I on a high enough spiritual level," they wondered, "to live in such a holy place?" Their additional laws, and the more exacting level of Divine scrutiny, were frightening. After all, this land is described as a place of unique character and characteristics:

The land you are about to occupy is not like Egypt, the place you left, where you could plant seeds and irrigate it by yourself, like a vegetable garden. Rather, the land which you are crossing into is a land of mountains and valleys, which can be irrigated only by the rain. It is

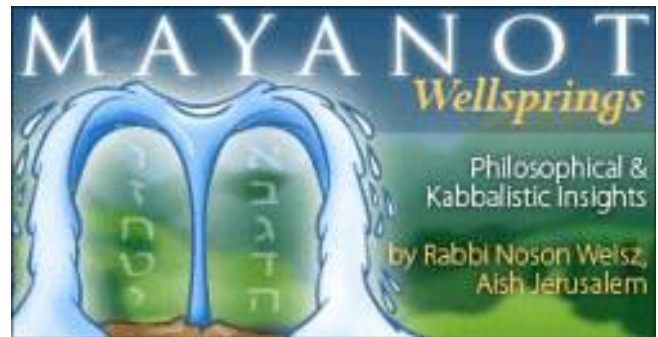
therefore a land constantly under Almighty God's scrutiny; the eyes of the Almighty your God are on it at all times, from the beginning of the year until the end of the year. (Dvarim 11:10-12)

God's constant scrutiny is daunting; who could possibly live under such pressure? Who would willingly subject himself to that? Nonetheless, the tradeoff - the opportunity to live in "God's palace," to be close to the Divine, seems like an offer one cannot possibly refuse.

Those who make that leap, those who cross over and settle in the Promised Land, may be tempted see others in a harsh, critical light, and to hold them up to impossibly high standards: "Perhaps **they** are unworthy, perhaps **they** will cause all of us to be expelled." Such self-righteous posturing was anticipated years ago by a famous Kabbalist, Rabbi Avraham Azzulai. Looking back at the verses in this week's parashah, Rabbi Azzulai drew the opposite conclusion regarding the "others" who live in this land, those perceived as not that holy enough or deserving enough:

And you should know that every person who lives in the Land of Israel is considered a *tzaddik* (righteous person), including those who do not appear to be *tzaddikim*. For if he was not righteous, the land would expel him, as it says "a land that vomits out its inhabitants." Since the land did not vomit him out, he is certainly righteous, even though he appears to be wicked. (Rabbi Avraham Azzulai, *Hesed l'Avraham*, ma'ayan 3 nahar 12)

The Land of Israel is indeed a holy land, and when we look at *ourselves*, each of us should make sure that we live up to God's standards. In order to merit living in the Holy Land, we must reject the sordid behavior of the Egyptians and the Canaanites, and follow the way of God. However, when we look at *others*, we must never question *their* right to be in the Holy Land. The fact that the land "tolerates" their presence is proof enough that they are deserving, and holy.



### The Scapegoat

*"The goat will bear upon itself all their iniquities..."* (Leviticus 16:22)

Our Parsha begins with the discussion of one of the most perplexing ceremonies in the Torah; the offering of a "scapegoat" to atone for our sins – the goat that is pushed over the cliff on the Day of Atonement and carries away all the sins of the Jewish people on its back.

Maimonides tells us that the "scapegoat":

...[Has the capacity to] atone for all the sins in the Torah, whether they be light or grave, whether the transgression was committed

unintentionally or with deliberation, whether the sin is known to the perpetrator or whether it is not ... (Laws of Repentance 1:2)

By way of explanation the Midrash offers the following idea:

This goat [the scapegoat, called *sair* in Hebrew] refers to Esau, as it is written: "*but my brother Esau is a hairy [written as *soir* in Hebrew] man*" (Genesis 27:11) [The Hebrew words *sair*, "goat," and *soir*, "hairy" are spelled identically.]

[It is further written]: "*The goat will bear upon itself all their inequities (avonotam).*" In Hebrew the word *avonotam* can be split into two words *avonot tam*, meaning "the inequities of the innocent." This is a reference to Jacob about whom it is written: "*Jacob was a wholesome (tam) man*" (Genesis 25:27). The word *tam* in Hebrew means wholesome or innocent. (Bereishis Rabba 65:15)

The scapegoat represents Esau, and the Midrash suggests that this explains how it works; the sins committed by Israel are somehow traceable back to Jacob, as we are all his descendants. Jacob's sins can somehow be blamed on Esau, and therefore it makes sense that the goat, which represents Esau, carries away all of Israel's sins. Is there any way we can bring these seemingly strange concepts a little closer to earth?

## HUMAN SCAPEGOATS

This week's Torah portion opens with an incident involving human deaths that is reminiscent of the scapegoat concept:

*"God spoke to Moses after the death of Aaron's two sons, who brought an [unauthorized] offering before God and they died."* (Leviticus 16:1)

As we might recall from Parshat Shmini (Leviticus, Chap. 10) Aaron's sons were consumed by fire when they entered the Holy of Holies unbidden in an attempt to bring an unauthorized incense offering.

Moses offered Aaron the following words of consolation:

*"Of this did God speak, saying: 'I will be sanctified through those who are nearest Me, thus I will be honored before the entire people.' And Aaron was silent."* (Leviticus 10:3)

The Talmud interprets the meaning of this verse with the help of a Midrash:

Moses told Aaron: "Aaron, my brother, I knew that the Temple would be sanctified through someone very holy and close to God. I thought it had to be either you or me ... but now I see that they, Nadav and Avihu, are greater than we are [as they were selected]." (Talmud, Zevachim 115b)

Moses consoles Aaron with the thought that the deaths of Aaron's two sons were required to sanctify the Temple. Apparently two of the holiest Jews alive had to die in order for the Temple to be

properly sanctified. Moses thought that he and Aaron would be selected, and he was somewhat surprised when Aaron's two sons were chosen instead. If so, Nadav and Avihu were also scapegoats of a sort; their deaths were required to inaugurate the Temple for the rest of us.

Although bringing the unauthorized incense is explicitly stated as the reason for their deaths, the Talmud is suggesting that it was not the ultimate reason. While Nadav and Avihu would not have died had they done nothing wrong, the punishment of their sin took into account the fact that their deaths would have secondary effect; there was something still missing in the Temple and their deaths were needed to supply the missing factor.

How can people's deaths do that? What was missing? Doesn't the Torah abhor the very idea of human sacrifice?!

The scapegoat concept is integral to atonement. To understand it better, we must understand atonement better. Atonement is the conclusion of a long process that begins with repentance. To understand atonement better we must do a little work on repentance first.

### **REPENTANCE AS A PROCESS**

Atonement is conditional upon repentance, and repentance has definite rules. At the very beginning of the Laws of Repentance, when he is discussing the rules of repentance, Maimonides explains that repentance requires confession, and that confession contains three elements:

1. Admitting to having committed the sin.
2. Expressing sincere regret for having committed it.
3. Making a firm commitment never to do it again.

Without a confession that contains all these elements, complete atonement is impossible to attain no matter how sincere the sinner may be in his heart concerning his or her repentance.

Maimonides discusses the issue of repentance specifically in the context of the Day of Atonement in the second Chapter (ibid.):

The Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur, is a time of repentance for everyone – for the individual as well as the congregation. It marks the final stage of forgiveness and pardon for Israel and therefore, everyone is commanded to repent and confess on Yom Kippur ... The confession that Israel has adopted to say on Yom Kippur is: But we have sinned, and this is the essence of confession. (Laws of Repentance 2:7-8)

It is perplexing to note that two of the three elements Maimonides himself earlier stressed as being essential requirements of confession are missing from the Yom Kippur confession he cites – the expression of regret over having sinned, and the commitment never to repeat the sin. If Israel as a nation adopts a standard form confession to recite in order to fulfill the repentance requirement of the day of Atonement and incorporates it into the public prayer all Jews are told to recite, how is it possible that the more important aspects of confession are missing from it?

## **WHY CONFESS?**

Let us begin by attempting to understand the role confession plays in the repentance process. We Jews do not confess our sins to a priest who is empowered to give us absolution. Given that repentance really takes place in the heart, what possible role does confession play in it?

Repentance is based on change. A person's actions reflect his beliefs, his character and his personality. Repentance is about changing one or all of the above: If we would enunciate the penitent's claim to forgiveness it would probably sound something like this, "I am no longer the person who committed the sin. I have changed, and the sin I committed no longer expresses the person I am. I look back at the person who committed the sin, and I no longer recognize myself in him or her. Since the new 'me' cannot be identified with the sin it isn't fair to punish me."

When this statement reflects the inner actuality of the speaker, God accepts it and takes note of the change. Since the person has changed, and the sin no longer reflects his character and personality, it is irrational to hold the person of today morally responsible and liable for the acts of a person who no longer exists; God duly pardons the sin.

## **THE PROCESS OF CHANGE**

Unlike God, we humans are unable to see into people's hearts; we can only see each other's deeds; we are therefore unable to factor repentance effectively into human justice systems. But most of us do appreciate the rationale of linking repentance to forgiveness. We generally agree that the essence of a person is character, and when there is a profound character change in

someone, we are dealing with a brand new person. Most of us can relate to the principle of atonement – if a sinner becomes a genuinely different person from who he was when he or she committed the sin we can all see the justice of excusing him or her from having to suffer the consequences.

In effect then, repentance involves the shedding of old character traits. We are unable to alter our height, our I.Q., or our age, but we are able to change our characters. When we repent we are changing our inner furniture, leaving only the outer shell intact. In the view of most of us, such a change makes us another person entirely.

We cannot shed our character traits without tinkering with the innermost core of our beings, throwing out parts of the old operating system that was in charge of directing the drives and motivations that prompted us to sin. To step away from our old selves we need to shed these old motivators like a snake sloughs off his worn out layer of skin and emerge with a brand new operating system that drives us toward the good.

Speech is the only method at our disposal for externalizing our inner selves. It is through the medium of speech that we express the feelings in our hearts and the thoughts in our minds. When they are expressed they become part of the outer world in a sense. Verbalizing our feelings of repentance by confessing the sins we have committed is our way of discarding old thoughts and attitudes; we eject the feelings that prompted the commission of our sins by speaking them out; we symbolically throw them out of our inner



environment wrapped in the packages of our words.

**THE DIFFICULTY OF CHANGE**

Change is difficult. We often regret our actions as soon as we complete them, but rarely do we succeed in really changing ourselves. Most often we repeat our past mistakes and regret them each time all over again. The third requirement of repentance, the resolution 'never to do this again' is the sticking point that generally defeats our sincere desire to become better people. As everyone who owns a computer knows, when there is something basically wrong with your operating system you are in big trouble. We need serious help to change. This is where the Day of Atonement comes in.

Let us attempt to trace how Yom Kippur operates by looking at the Temple service and applying the spiritual symbols to the individual Jewish heart.

On Yom Kippur, the High Priest entered the Holy of Holies, and performed precisely the same act that caused the deaths of Aaron's sons. We are reminded at the very outset:

*"And God said to Moses: Speak to Aaron your brother – he shall not come at all times into the Sanctuary (the Holy of Holies) within the curtain, in front of the cover that is on the Ark, so that he should not die; for in a cloud will I appear on the Ark-cover." (Leviticus 16:2)*

Rashi explains:

Why did God couple the death of Aaron's sons with the commandment

restricting Aaron's entry into the Holy of Holies? Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah compared this to a sick person who had to be cautioned not to eat cold food or sleep in a damp place. One doctor merely gave him the instructions without elaboration, but a second doctor told him, "Unless you avoid cold food and damp places, you will die as so-and-so died." Clearly the second doctor's warning was more effective. (Sifra)

The first part of this week's Torah portion is devoted to describing the special conditions that are required to render Aaron's annual entry into the Holy of Holies safe.

**HOLY OF HOLIES**

In order to understand the significance of entering the Holy of Holies, we have to remember how we ourselves are put together spiritually.

Tradition teaches that the human soul has five levels, of which the lower three are connected to our physical selves. And it is these three that concern us here. At the core of our being we are a *neshama*, which is always connected to God to such a great extent that it is difficult to tell where the Divine Presence ends and the person begins. Although our *neshama* is the core of our being, we are not self-conscious on the level of *neshama*; we are only self-conscious on the bottom two levels of our souls, the *Ruach* and the *nefesh*.

The *neshama* is connected to our *ruach*, our spiritual self. We are all self aware as spiritual beings; we can all imagine ourselves as living

without our bodies, and we all have a sense of morality and right and wrong that we know is above all materialistic considerations. The *ruach* is connected to our *nefesh*, the life force that burns within us and is the engine that drives us, the materialistic part of our beings.

The Temple is put together in the same way. The outermost level is called the *Azara*, and that is where the animal sacrifices are all brought. This level parallels the *nefesh*. It is connected to the *Heichal*, a much more spiritual place. No animal sacrifices are ever offered there. The incense is offered in the *Heichal*, that is where the Menorah is to be found; the Holy bread that stays warm and fresh from Shabbat to Shabbat is there. It is clearly a more spiritual part of the Temple, but we still have daily access to it just as we do to our own spirituality. This level parallels the *ruach*.

Finally within the innermost recesses of the *Heichal* is the Holy of Holies; a separate alcove that is curtained off; the Holy Ark is kept there and this is the place that the *Shechinah* inhabits; we do not have daily access to this part of the Temple at all. The only person who ever enters it is the High Priest, and even he is only allowed to enter once a year. This lack of access is clearly an existential expression of our lack of access to our own *neshamot*.

### **DEFINING YOURSELF**

The symbolism is clear; the High priest who enters the Holy of Holies on Yom Kippur must enter it on the level of *neshama*.

Life is problematic only because we are not really sure about how to define ourselves. Were we able

to see ourselves clearly as *neshamot* and were we therefore conscious of our unbreakable attachment to God, the point of our lives would be quite clear to us; we wouldn't be at all confused as to why we exist and what we are supposed to do with our lives. But God decreed that we must live with free will, and therefore the awareness of how our life depends on our attachment to God at the source of our beings is withheld from our self-consciousness.

Instead we are placed in a situation of existential conflict; our raging life force, the *nefesh*, and our spiritual side, the *ruach*, are always contending with each other pulling us in different directions. The ceaseless conflict confuses us; none of us are sure of who and what we are. No one wants to deny their real selves and live the wrong life; our confusion about who we are is the source of our sins. The eternal confusion is the dilemma that forms the backdrop against which we must exercise our free will.

Our state of oblivion regarding the existence of our *neshama*, the highest level of our soul that is always attached to God renders us incapable of reaching clarity about who we are and clearing up our confusion.

Stepping into the Holy of Holies means becoming self-conscious as *neshamot*. The fog of confusion is instantly dissipated and replaced by total clarity of vision. To enjoy such clarity runs contrary to the purpose of living in this world. To enter the Holy of Holies is to step out of life as God decreed that it must be lived here in this world of difficult choices. When Nadav and Avihu took this step, they terminated the point of their

continued existence in the world of choice and therefore left it; they died.

But they sanctified the Temple in the process. They demonstrated the existence of the Temple on the level of *neshama*, they demonstrated the existence of their own Neshamot, the state of the attachment of the *neshama* to God, and how this relationship is mirrored by the Holy of Holies in the Temple. To us plain folks the cause of their death would perhaps have remained a total mystery; but to the 'generation of the wise' who stood at the foot of Mt. Sinai the lesson taught by their deaths was obvious, and revealed the power of the heretofore missing dimension of the Temple, the Holy of Holies.

### **THE GIFT OF YOM KIPPUR**

We are at the cusp of Yom Kippur. The level of clarity to which Nadav and Avihu aspired may not be possible to hang on to in this earthly life, but the occasional attainment of such a level of clarity is a matter of necessity for every Jew. We must be able to obtain an occasional glimpse of our true origins, otherwise the accumulation of the errors of existence will move us steadily further and further away from our *neshamot*, from the point of our attachment to God until the way back becomes so cluttered with the debris of our mistakes that the return journey becomes impossible to attempt.

Existence in a state of irreconcilable confusion is just as purposeless as existence in a total state of clarity. Neither state allows for the existence of free will. If we totally lost the ability to find our way back to our origins we would also lose the point of our existence.

That is why God gave us Yom Kippur. On this one special day, God allows us to step out of our ordinary selves and offers us a glimpse of our true connection to Him. Our representative, the Kohen Gadol, is allowed to become self-aware on the level of *neshama*. This allows us all to get a glimpse of who we really are and points the way back to our origins by temporarily resolving our inner conflicts and allowing us to reach clarity. We can push out the things that separate us from God as long as we are under the inspiration of the clarity offered by the entry of the Kohen Gadol into the Holy of Holies.

Armed with this information we can easily comprehend the difference between the confession of the ordinary penitent, and the confession we utter on Yom Kippur. In the confusion of ordinary life, when we are not self-aware on the level of *neshama*, changing our characters and redefining ourselves is a heroic process. The attainment of the level of sincere regret and the ability to form a firm resolution never to return to past misdeeds – the necessary concomitants of *all* character change – are extremely arduous tasks. Therefore, repentance is extremely difficult to attain, and the penitent must reach very lofty spiritual levels on the basis of his own efforts.

On Yom Kippur – when we are offered a glimpse of our origins and the confusion of self-definition is largely eliminated – the rejection of all our negatives becomes a matter of course. We are able to push out all our sinful activities as unreflective of our true selves, because we are provided a glimpse of who we really are. The confession of Yom Kippur is simply that we have sinned. We

regret our inequities and can truly resolve never to return to them, not because we have developed the determination and resolve necessary for the achievement of internal change, but because of the clear vision of ourselves that the Holiness of the day provides. The character change of Yom Kippur may be very temporary but it is nevertheless very real.

### **THE SCAPEGOAT REVISITED**

Isaac's twin sons, Jacob and Esau, were spiritually more powerful than we are. They attained the absolute clarity of vision that comes from total self-definition without the help of Divine intervention, through the exercise of their own freedom of choice. Jacob defined himself as a *neshama* – Jacob was a 'wholesome man', totally consistent and whole and free of contradictions. Esau declared, "Look I am going to die," thus defining himself as a creature of this world only, a man of the field.

We do not possess the spiritual strength to arrive at the clarity of vision that allows such sharp self-definition, but on Yom Kippur, the original distinction between Jacob and Esau reestablishes itself in all of us with God's help. We, the descendants of Jacob, regain our forefather Jacob's original wholesomeness. Our total lack of confusion highlights the opposite side of the coin as well. All of a sudden we are a billion percent clear that we are not Esau, and we realize that the spiritual problems we face the rest of the year comes from the lack of clarity about not being Esau. This then is the secret behind the idea of the "scapegoat."

The loss of the Temple and the Holy of Holies, the fact that we can no longer sacrifice the "scapegoat" does not mean that we have entirely lost Yom Kippur. But we have bodies; we are inhabitants of a world of action, not spirit. God gave us a Temple and sacrifices because He knows that we are always hampered by the inability to translate our thoughts into deeds. Today, Yom Kipur still helps us to attain the spiritual level of true repentance, but the absence of the physical entry of the Kohen Godol into the Holy of Holies and the lack of the actual scapegoat, makes it much more difficult for us to hang on to the inspiration provided by this great uplift.

### **THE SECRET OF RETENTION**

The answer is to focus on the positive. On Yom Kippur, when we reach the level of *neshama* we should take upon ourselves one single Mitzvah that we will observe throughout the year on the level that we would observe all our Mitzvoth if we managed to hang on to the clarity of Yom Kippur. It would be foolish to select a difficult Mitzvah; even as we stand before God on Yom Kippur on the level of *neshama*, we are perfectly aware that tomorrow we will not even remember how it felt. A good example of an easy mitzvah: a single blessing; to always recite the blessing over water with the utmost focus and attention.

A small step perhaps, but it nevertheless allows us to keep the level of *neshama* as an actuality in our lives during the year. Connection to holiness means rejection of the opposite. If we retain a small point of holiness, we also retain a small point of separation from the level of Esau. The

essence of the scapegoat is complete detachment from what he represents. If we are totally detached from the level of Esau, the actions that arise out of the connection to him do not truly represent us.



### The Stuff of Life

Martyrdom is demanded of a person only rarely. He must allow himself to be killed rather than cause a *chillul Hashem*, a desecration of the holy Name. He must also be prepared to die rather than commit one of the three cardinal sins  $\frac{3}{4}$  idolatry, illicit relations and bloodshed. Otherwise, he is allowed to violate any prohibition in the Torah in order to save his life.

The Talmud (*Sanhedrin* 74a) derives these guidelines from the verse, “And you shall keep My decrees and My laws, that a person shall do them, and he shall live by them, I am God.” The Torah wants the Jew to “*vechai bahem*, live by them,” not to die by them. If you have to eat *chametz* on Pesach in order to survive, do so. If you have to desecrate the Sabbath to save your life, do so. If you have to eat nonkosher food to avoid starvation, do so. Your first priority is to “live by them,” not to die.

There is a general misconception about this passage in the Talmud. At a cursory glance, the Talmud seems to be saying that life is a higher value than the fulfillment of the *mitzvos*. But what does this mean? How does one define the life that is so precious even though it is devoid of *mitzvos*? What makes it so precious? Watching the sunrise on the beach? Reading a good book? Sipping a cup of heavenly coffee?

This is not what the Talmud is saying. Onkelos translates the words *vechai bahem* as “he will live forever [in the World to Come].” Rashi also follows that translation, pointing out that “it cannot mean in this world, because he will eventually die.”

Accordingly, Rav Moshe Feinstein in *Igros Moshe* sees the Talmud as telling us something totally different. On the contrary, the most precious thing in life is *mitzvos* because we “live by them”; they bring us to the World to Come, to eternal life. Therefore, in case of danger it is better to violate a prohibition of the Torah if by doing so one will survive to fulfill many more *mitzvos* for years to come. The Talmud tells us (*Yoma* 85b), “Desecrate Shabbos for him once in order that he should observe Shabbos many times.” For the Jewish people, *mitzvos* are the stuff of life.

The Gerrer Rebbe offers a *chassidishe* interpretation of this phrase, “*vechai bahem*, that you shall live by them.” What do we call “living by them”?

In the *yeshivah* world, one often hears the question, “Where do you get your *chius*?” Literally, this means, “Where do you get your

life?” The question touches on a profound issue. Where do you find the spark of life? What brightens up your day when you get out of bed in the morning? What excites you? What gives you the zest for life? For some people, it is the prospect of learning Torah. For others, it is the opportunity to do some good work in Jewish outreach. And for yet others, it is the prospect of a good steak or a good game of baseball.

This, says the Gerrer Rebbe, is what the Torah is telling us. A person should “live by the *mitzvos*.” His *chius*, his zest for life, should derive from the prospect of doing *mitzvos*. These should be the entire *raison d’être* for his existence in this fleeting material world.

Before you turn around, your life in this world is over, even if you were blessed with a ripe old age. It is all a dream, an illusion. You cannot look for the meaning of life in this world, only in the eternal World of Truth, and only *mitzvos* will bring you there. Only *mitzvos* will give you an everlasting, meaningful life.

You should never seek to accumulate money for its own sake. What will it get you? A little extra pleasure in this world? Is that life? Is that where you are expecting to find your *chius*? You should work as much as you have to in order to provide a livelihood for your family, but you should seek your *chius* from doing *mitzvos* and chessed with your wife and children, your family, your community, all the Jewish people. You should seek your *chius*, your lifeforce, in the Torah. You should seek your *chius* in building a close relationship with the Master of the Universe. That is the key to eternal life.

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