

Secrets of the Yom Kippur Machzor - Jonah the Prophet and Rabbi Soloveitchik on giving yourself a second chance.

Yom Kippur as experience

REMINISCENCE: AN AMERICAN FARMER

I will never forget the beautiful scene that took place during Kol Nidre. The quorum assembled in the house of one of the farmers. The house was surrounded by trees; the windows were open, and a soft, refreshing breeze was blowing. The menfolk looking very healthy stood in one room, wrapped in their prayer shawls, while the women stood in the other with sunburnt faces and white dresses. The sad and pleasant Kol Nidre melody flowed into the silence of the night. It seemed as though nature itself was listening to the song of the eternal wanderer, who had at last found a place to rest his head. I remembered the Kol Nidre that my forefathers had chanted hiding in dark cellars in Spain. There they poured forth their hearts before their God. Their groaning and moaning were contained in the damp, cold earth, until such time as the Inquisitors came and drew the miserable folk out of the bowels of the earth into the beautiful sunshine—and cast them into the fire. Only then could a Jew freely cry the powerful words, "Hear, O Israel."

The cantor lifted his voice and chanted Kol Nidre for the third time. I seemed to awake from a terrible dream. I saw a beautiful world lying before me. The birds under the window were assisting the cantor with their song, and the

heaven and the earth, those witnesses of all that had happened to the people of Israel, were joining in song.

Our Creator, thou art eternal, and thy folk Israel is eternal. [Shishim Shenot Hayyim]

Kol Nidrei is an enigma wrapped in a mystery, the strangest prayer ever to capture the religious imagination. First, it is not a prayer at all. It is not even a confession. It is a dry legal formula for the annulment of vows. It is written in Aramaic. It does not mention God. [It shows that] the synagogue could be turned into a court of law. That is the function of Kol Nidrei. Precisely because it is not a prayer but a legal process, it signals that for the next twenty-five hours what is about to happen is something more and other than prayer in the conventional sense. The Beit Kneset (synagogue) has become a Beit Din, a court of law. Sitting on the Throne of Justice is God Himself, and we are the defendants. The trial that began on Rosh HaShanah has reached its last day. We are the accused, and we are about to be judged on the evidence of our lives. So Kol Nidrei, the prayer-that-is-not-a-prayer, transforms the house of prayer into a law-court, providing the setting and mood for the unique drama that will reach its climax at Ne'ilah when the court rises, the Judge is ready to leave, and the verdict, written, is about to be sealed.

Judaism has been accused over the centuries of being a religion of law, not love. This is precisely untrue. Judaism is a religion of law and love, for without law there is no justice, and even with law (indeed, only with law) there is still mercy, compassion and forgiveness.

God's great gift of love was law: the law that establishes human rights and responsibilities, that treats rich and poor alike, that allows God to challenge humans but also humans to challenge God, the law studied by every Jewish child, the law written in letters of black fire on white fire that burns in our hearts, making Jews among the most passionate fighters for justice the world has ever known. Law without love is harsh, but love without law is anarchy and eventually turns to hate. So in the name of the love-of-law and the law-of-love, we ask God to release us from our vows and from our sins, for the same reason: that we regret and have remorse for both. The power of Kol Nidrei...is [that it sets the scene of Yom Kippur as] a courtroom drama, unique to Judaism, in which we stand, giving an account of our lives, our fate poised between God's justice and compassion

RJ Sacks

...[H]ow can the concept of releasing one from vows (matir neder) be even remotely ascribed to the Master of the Universe? We can shed light on this idea through closer examination of the concept of hataras nedarim. One reason we recite Kol Nidrei before Yom Kippur is as follows: When G-d pronounced His intention to destroy Israel, the pronouncement had the status of a vow. The Zohar says that Kol Nidrei is designed to release G-d from this vow, as it were. On Erev Yom Kippur, Jews are constituted as a beis din to "absolve" Hashem. The Zohar derives this concept directly from the passage in the Gemara, wherein Moses released G-d from His vow.

By use of the word vayechal, Moses was telling Hashem that He must view the Jewish people in the same way that a court looks at one who wishes to nullify a vow. The vow was mistaken from the start; the person was not himself when it was uttered. Even when a Jew worships idols, deep in his heart he is good. For every Jew who worshiped the Golden Calf, there is another inner Jew who did not, and these Jews must be saved. There was hardly a group of sinners more infamous than those who worshiped the Golden Calf. Yet Moses was able to annul God's vow to destroy Israel by arguing that every Jew who participated in the sin had a split personality, one that worshiped the Calf and one that did not. The pure essence of the Jew who did not engage in such worship needed to be saved

(Derashos HaRav, pp. 101-102)

Yaleh

On the eve of Yom Kippur, immediately after the amida of ma'ariv, there is a piyut which apprehends the unique nature of prayer on Yom Kippur:

"Ya'aleh tahanuneinu me'erev, veyavo shavateinu miboker, veyaraeh rinuneinu ad arev."

"May our supplications ascend from evening, and may our cry arrive from morning, and may our praise find favor (literally 'be seen') by evening"

In this piyut, the request is explicitly made that the entire day be a yom tefila in that one already anticipates Ne'ilah in his prayers from the previous evening. All three verbs in this first sentence of the piyut are paralleled by the biblical description of three stages in Israel's prayer during the Egyptian exile. There are three parts to the piyut:

1) Evening - Ascension: The Torah describes the initial stage of prayer by the enslaved Hebrews: "...and their supplication ascended unto G-d by reason of their bondage"

At this point in their slavery experience, Israel had no intention of formulating prayer as such. This initial stage of prayer is little more than a poorly articulated instinctive cry (10). According to the Ramban, Hashem Himself "lifted" their supplication, allowing their cry to rise up before Him. On the evening of Yom Kippur, we similarly ask Hashem to allow our prayer to rise.

2) Morning - Arrival :

"...the cry of Bnai Yisrael has come before me" (Exodus 3:9)

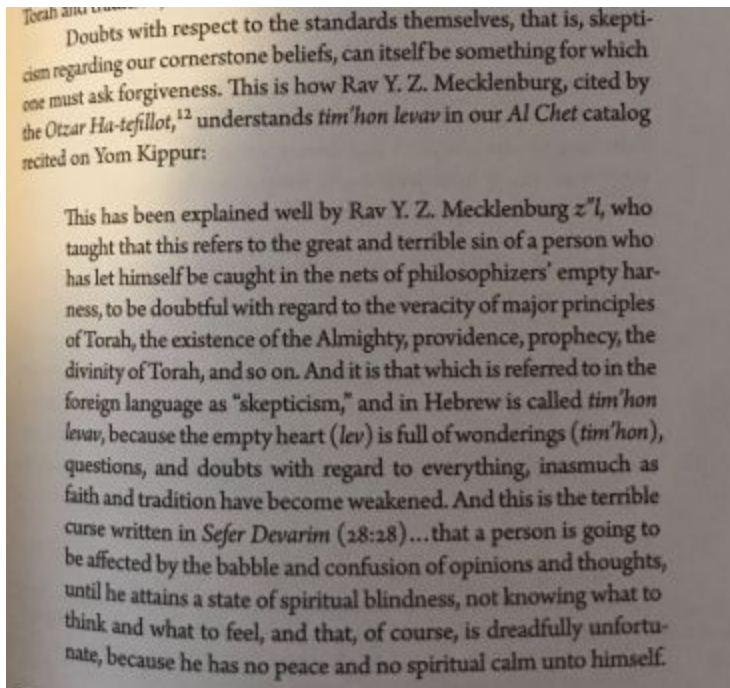
In the morning we ask Hashem that our prayer enter before Him and be heard.

3) Evening - Acceptance ("seeing"):

"...and G-d saw...and took cognizance" (Exodus 2:25)

Ne'ilah is the prayer in which we ask for Hashem's acceptance of all our prayers, uniting all the previous prayers into one large "ma'aseh tefila" or prayer activity. The piyut therefore expresses the hope that our prayers of the evening become a suitable introduction to those of the morning, and that those of the morning be a suitable introduction to those of the following evening, in accordance with the Biblical verse regarding Yom Kippur:

Vidui



Rav Aaron Lichtenstein

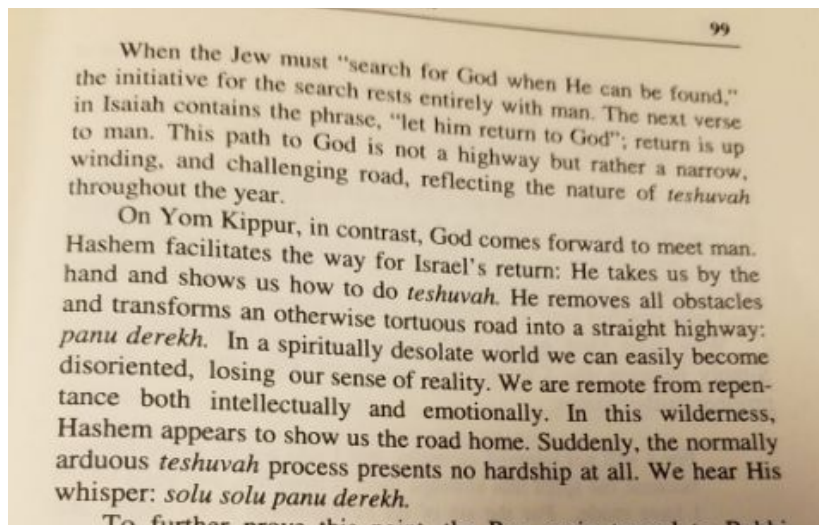
After Shemona Esray, Rava would say the following: "My God, before I was created I was worthless, and now that I am created, it is as if I was not created. I am dust in my life, certainly in my death. I am before you as a vessel that is filled with embarrassment and shame. "Before I was created," certainly all of those infinite times that existed prior to my

creation there was nothing in the world that needed me, for if I was needed for the completion of some goal I would have been created. And since I was not created until a certain time, it is an indication that it would not have been worth it for me to be created and there was no need for me except for the present, because the time has arrived that I need to do something for the perfection of reality.

And if I would channel my actions towards that goal for which I was created, then I am now "worth it." However, now that my actions are not directed towards that good goal, rather to act in accordance with the arbitrariness of my heart, I have not fulfilled my purpose. Therefore, I am still valueless, just as before my birth.

Rav Kook

Haftora



Avoda

"As a child, I keenly felt the "kedushas hayom" of Yom Kippur. The holiness of Yom Kippur was not merely a phrase, it was an experience I do not know how to adequately relate. The enthusiasm, the ecstasy, the recognition of this holiness reached it's pinnacle at the avoda."

In his 1979 Teshuva lecture, the Rav describes the avoda recitation of his father and grandfather in this way:

"They said it with so much enthusiasm, such ecstasy, that they could not stop. They were no longer in Warsaw or Brisk: they were transported to a different reality. Although I am not a musician or musicologist, all one had to do was hear the nigun of "Hakohanim Veha'am" to understand. One did not even need to hear the words in order to feel the nostalgia for what once existed and is no longer. Similarly, "V'kach haya moneh: achas, achas v'achas". Towards the end of the avoda, when the scarlet thread turned white, the

piyut describes how the nation exuded happiness, expressing pleasure and delight, a feeling of closeness to Hashem: He is right beside me."

The avoda description culminates in the majestic piyut "mar'eh kohen", describing the luminous appearance of the Kohen Gadol after successfully completing the avoda:

"Why the happiness in reciting "mar'eh kohen"? Why was it sung with such a happy tune? The answer is that the Kohen Gadol reflected the radiance of the shechina. Through witnessing the radiant appearance of the Kohen Gadol, there could be no doubt about Hashem's acceptance of klal yisrael's prayers."

The Essence of the Day

There is an anomalous view, formulated by the *Tanna* known as Rebbe (Rabbi Yehudah Hanasi) that the day of Yom Kippur provides atonement even if the individual does not engage in *teshuvah* (*Shevuot* 13a). The Rav, in clarifying this difficult opinion, had discussed Rebbe's ruling in earlier *teshuvah* lectures. In his 1976 *Teshuvah Derashah* the Rav clarified a specific detail discussed by Rashi regarding Rebbe's view -- a detail that cuts to the very essence of Yom Kippur.

Rebbe states that atonement is bestowed to all on Yom Kippur, even if an individual ignores the most basic of Yom Kippur obligations. Among these violated imperatives, Rebbe lists not fasting, not abstaining from work, and "[not] declaring (the day of Yom Kippur) as a holy convocation." Rashi, in explaining Rebbe's opinion, clarifies that the failure to make this declaration means: "The person did not say the blessing [which appears towards the end of each Yom Kippur *Amidah*]: '[He Who] sanctifies Israel and Yom HaKippurim.' "

Torah strongly disapproves of this view, and not in contrast to the *vidui* of the *Kohen Gadol*? The placement of the request for forgiveness within the blessing of the *kedushat hayom* is most pertinent. The request for forgiveness does not originate in a vacuum, but is connected to the day of Yom Kippur and the atonement that the day affords. Although a simple request for atonement can be made any time during the year, the specific request for atonement through the day of Yom Kippur can only be made on Yom Kippur. Therefore, the request for atonement appears specifically within the blessing associated with the *kedushat hayom*.

The complete *vidui* of the *Kohen Gadol* is as follows:

In this vein, the Rav cited his seminal work *Halakhic Man*, in which he described a childhood scene on the afternoon of Yom Kippur in this way:⁴

I remember how once, on the Day of Atonement, I went outside into the synagogue courtyard with my father [R. Moses Soloveitchik], just before the Ne'ilah service. It had been a fresh, clear day, one of the fine, almost delicate days of summer's end, filled with sunshine and light. Evening was fast approaching and an exquisite autumn sun was sinking in the west, beyond the trees of the cemetery, into a sea of purple and gold. R. Moses, a halakhic man par excellence, turned to me and said: "This sunset differs from ordinary sunsets for with it forgiveness is bestowed upon us for our sins" (the end of the day atones.)ⁱⁱⁱ The Day of Atonement and the forgiveness of sin merged and blended here with the splendor and beauty of the world and with the hidden lawfulness of the order of creation and the whole was transformed into one living, holy, cosmic phenomenon.

Sefer Yona

What is the order [of service] for fast days? They would bring out the Ark to the town square and place ashes upon the Ark, the head of the Nassi, and the head of the Chief of the Court, and everyone [else] places [ashes] upon his [own] head. The eldest among them would preach words of inspiration before them: "Our brethren, it is not stated regarding the people of Ninveh 'And G-d saw their sackcloth and their fasted' but [rather] 'And G-d saw their deed, that they repented their evil ways.'" And in the admonition he states 'Now rend your hearts and not your clothing.'

After the prophet **Jonah** admonished the people, the king counseled his people to repent: "Let everyone turn back from his evil ways and from the *chamas* that is in their hands" (**Jonah** 3:8). Why was robbery singled out from amongst all their transgressions?

Moreover, in the Yom Kippur *Neilah* service, we implore the Almighty for forgiveness for all our transgressions "so that we might cease from the *oshek* (thievery) of our hands." Again the question: why is theft singled out with special emphasis in the *Neilah* service?

The answer is that all sinning involves thievery. When we indulge in what is forbidden we are in effect, taking that which is not ours. . . . All that we presumptuously call "ours" is really "His." We may use these gifts conditionally, for the period of our lifetime, only with His concurrence and in accordance with His stipulations. When we sin, these privileges are forfeited and nullified. Their continued utilization is larceny (Rabbi Abraham R. Besdin, *Reflections of the Rav*, pp. 19–21).