

FOUND INNOCENT

by Rabbi Label Lam

Rabbi Akiva says, "Happy are you Israel! Before Whom do you purify yourselves and Who purifies you? Your- Father in Heaven! As it says, "The Mikvah of Israel is HASHEM!" (Jeremiah 17) Just as a Mikvah purifies from sins so The Holy One Blessed Be He purifies Israel." (Talmud Yuma 85 B) For on this day (Yom Kippur) He will make atonement for you to cleanse you from all your sins, before HASHEM you will be cleansed. (Vayikra 16:30) How do we gain atonement through Yom Kippur? Does it work magically by itself? Is there something we have to do?

Many moons ago when I was about to start commuting daily to the "big city" a close rebbe and mentor suggested I do something I never thought I would be able to keep up. He advised that for the purpose of spiritual maintenance that I immerse myself in a Mikvah every day. I agreed to give it a try. I felt a difference almost immediately for some seemingly mystical reason in the quality of my performance. "How does it work?" I wondered. Only later I met these ultra poetic words of the Rambam at the end of the laws of Mikva where he explains the dynamics of a Mikva.

"The immersion to remove oneself from contamination is included in the category of laws known as chukim-statutes because there is no physical dirt that the water removes. It is strictly a decree of the verse and depends upon the intent of the heart. Therefore if the person immerses but decides to remain the same, it is as if he did not immerse himself. The one who focuses his heart is purified even though nothing bodily is renewed because he directed his heart to purify his soul from spiritual contaminants which are wicked thoughts and bad attitudes since he agreed in his heart to separate from these counselors and enter his soul into "the waters of pure knowledge".

That year on Yom Kippur, right near the end of the fast, before the final prayer service "Neilah" we took a short break. I approached this teacher of mine and expressed to him how much I missed the Mikva on Yom Kippur. Of all the days not to be able to go, I felt deprived somehow of that feeling I was getting used to daily. He looked at me with eyes that shouted but he whispered softly, "If you think that you need to go to the Mikva today, then you don't understand what this day is about!" He then said emphatically, "You're in the Mikva, right now! The Mikva of Israel is HASHEM!"

His words changed my experience for the rest of that Yom Kippur and many others to follow. I realized that on this special day we are immersing ourselves in YUD / HEY / VUV / HEY. What activates the cleaning process is the simple thought that we are soaking in the most powerful truly universal solvent and that we wish to remove the all the stains of stupidity that cloud our system. Then the dirt begins to fall away and we only we remain.

Similarly, it has been said that Michelangelo was asked how he carved that statue of David out of a solid singular slab of stone. He is reputed to have answered, "I cut away everything that was not David and there he was!" So it is when we are rid of all extraneous impurities on Yom Kippur, we are once again please G-d- found innocent.

Good Shabbos!

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