

INSCRIBED ON OUR HEARTS

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Yom Kippur is the day on which Moshe Rabbeinu came down from Har Sinai with the second set of luchot. R' Chaim Friedlander z"l (mashgiach ruchani of the Ponovezh Yeshiva in Bnei Brak; died 1986) writes:

The luchot symbolize the heart--perhaps this is why the luchot are often, though erroneously, portrayed with rounded tops like on the common heart symbol--while the writing on the luchot represents the Will of G-d, which man is supposed to "engrave" on his heart. A person who succeeds in binding his heart to the Will of G-d will no longer be a slave to himself and will be free from the mundane desires of his heart. This is why Pirkei Avot makes a play on the similarity between "charut" / "engraved" (see Shmot 32:16) and "cheirut" / "freedom," and states that man is not free until he studies Torah.

When the first luchot were given, Bnei Yisrael prepared themselves for three days beforehand and achieved the level of Adam Ha'rishon before his sin. They were able to receive luchot that were crafted by G-d because their hearts--which the luchot symbolize--were as pure as the first heart that G-d created, R' Friedlander explains.

After the sin of the golden calf, however, everything changed. There was no period of purification before the second luchot were given, and the luchot themselves were man-made--only the writing was added by G-d. Like a ba'al teshuvah, Bnei Yisrael's task after the sin was to present their hearts (luchot) so that the Torah (the writing) could elevate them. This is the way of repentance. (Siftei Chaim, Vol. 1 p.25 [1st ed.])

A Prescription for Spiritual and Physical Health

The following "prescription" ("merkachat") is recommended by the prolific Torah and Talmud commentator and ethicist, R' Eliyahu Hakohen z"l (Izmir, Turkey; died 1729), in his work Shevet Mussar, chapter 6.

1. Take six roots, i.e., make sure your behavior is rooted in (1) fear of Heaven, (2) self-effacement, (3) humility, (4) shyness, (5) compassion, and (6) acts of kindness.
2. Add branches from the tree of Divine wisdom.
3. Add many grasses, i.e., performance of the positive and negative commandments.
4. Use stalks to make fences (to distance yourself from sin).
5. Sprinkle in flowers of charity and kind words to the poor. [Ed. note: Our Sages teach that the words one says to console the poor are as important as, or more important than, the money one gives.]
6. Add in the fruits of truth.
7. Crush all the ingredients with the mortar and pestle of regret and confession.
8. Boil in the waters of immersion in a mikvah.
9. Stir in tears.
10. Spice with extra precautions in the performance of mitzvot.
11. Fry in the oil of a good name [paraphrasing Kohelet 7:1, "A good name is better than fine oil."]
12. Pour the entire mixture on beds of teshuvah.

On the Importance of Appeasing Those We Have Hurt

Our Sages teach that one cannot achieve atonement unless he appeases those against whom he has sinned. Some say that one cannot achieve atonement even for his sins against G-d unless he has properly atoned for his sins against man, and received forgiveness. (Kaf Hachaim 606:3)

Why? Because atoning for only some sins is like immersing only part of one's body in a mikvah. Obviously, one does not attain purity by doing so. (Mussar Hamishnah)

R' Avraham Halevi Horowitz z"l (16th century; father of the Shelah Hakadosh) observes:

The obligation to ask forgiveness from those we have offended does not mean doing what is commonly done, i.e., that shortly before Kol Nidrei, one approaches his friends and asks their forgiveness. Inevitably, the friend responds, "You didn't do anything for which I have to forgive you." Then, these two friends forgive each other, something that was not necessary at all, since they were always dear to each other and would never wish each other harm.

In contrast, R' Horowitz continues, enemies tend not to ask forgiveness from each other. Rather, each one says, "If he were interested in peace, he would come to me." A wise man, however, would

recognize that the true sign of strength is humility, and he would take the initiative to appease his enemy, even if his enemy is in the wrong. (Emek Berachah)

R' Shlomo Zalman Auerbach z"l writes: Requesting general forgiveness for all sins that one has committed against another is effective only for minor offenses. [If one committed a more serious offense, he must specify it when he requests forgiveness.] (Quoted in Halichot Shlomo: Moadim p.44)

If one who has sinned against you does not come to you to seek forgiveness, you should make yourself available to him so that he might ask forgiveness. (Mateh Ephraim)

Because Yom Kippur does not atone until one appeases his neighbor, one should be certain to recite the following prayer (part of Tefilah Zakkah) which is printed in many machzorim:

"I extend complete forgiveness to everyone who has sinned against me, whether physically or financially, or who has gossiped about me or even slandered me; so, too, anyone who has injured me, whether physically or financially, and for any sins between man and his neighbor--except for money that I wish to claim and that I can recover in accordance with halachah, and except for someone who sins against me and says, 'I will sin against him and he will forgive me'--except for these, I grant complete forgiveness, and may no person be punished on my account.

"And just as I forgive everyone, so may You grant me favor in every person's eyes so that he will grant me complete forgiveness."

Why do we open the aron kodesh when reciting Aleinu on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur?

R' Mordechai Yafeh z"l (Prague; died 1612) explains: All year long, we end the service with Aleinu so that we will leave the shul after having bowed down to Hashem. Lest this prayer become routine, we open the aron kodesh when reciting it on the Days of Judgment to build up its esteem in our eyes so we will recite it with greater kavanah year round. (Levush: siman 133)

Already Ne'ilah? But I Haven't Repented Yet!

R' Yerucham Levovitz z"l (mashgiach ruchani of the Mir Yeshiva; died 1936) writes: Regarding the work we must do after Yom Kippur, we may understand it with a parable. When the economy is weak and people don't have cash with which to transact business, the only way commerce can continue is for merchants to extend credit. So it is with our atonement on Yom Kippur--our spiritual condition is weak, and we sometimes don't have the "cash" with which to achieve atonement from the Master of Compassion and Atonement. What I mean by this, R' Levovitz explains, is that we may not have completed all the steps involved in teshuvah [i.e., stopping the sinful behavior, committing never to repeat it, feeling genuine regret, and confessing]. However, the secret we must know is that, in Hashem's kindness, for the sake of the world's continued existence, He gives us His

merchandise--atonement on Yom Kippur--on credit. This means that even if we have not achieved all the steps of complete teshuvah, even if we have just made a commitment not to repeat the sin, but have not felt genuine regret, nevertheless Hashem, in His Goodness, shows us favor on Yom Kippur with the understanding that we will pay Him back [i.e., finish our repentance] after Yom Kippur.

But, continues R' Levovitz, we must not forget that it is impossible under any circumstances to fool Him! Hashem is a seasoned businessman and He only engages in ventures that will succeed. The midrash Shir Ha'shirim Rabbah relates that, when Bnei Yisrael stood at Har Sinai, Hashem said, "Bring Me good guarantors that you will keep the Torah, and then I will give it to you." [The midrash continues, relating that several guarantors were proposed one after another, including Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov, and Hashem rejected each one in turn for a different reason.] Finally, Bnei Yisrael said, "Our children will be our guarantors," to which Hashem replied, "Those are certainly good guarantors." The reason Hashem took guarantors is that He "knows His business" and He protects His "merchandise" in the best possible way. Similarly, when a person commits himself not to sin again, Hashem looks down from the Heavens at the person's deepest secrets to see whether he is sincere. The person himself may not know his deepest secrets; he may think he is sincere, yet Hashem may see him differently.

This explains why Rambam z"l writes that the commitment not to sin again must be so sincere that the "Knower of Secrets will testify" that the penitent will not repeat the sin. Commentaries ask: How can Hashem testify thus? What happened to man's free will? The answer is that man retains his free will. However, at the time of man's repentance, his commitment must be so sincere that Hashem can decide that he is a good "credit risk." (Shevivei Da'at p.242)