

CLASS 20 - YOM KIPPUR

by Rabbi Heshy Grossman

A person commits a violent crime of tragic consequence.

He kills an innocent victim, a young father, a small child. Years later, mature and remorseful, he begs forgiveness from the suffering family.

It is too late. The damage as been done.

When man violates the word of G-d, he has done more than a mere misdeed. He has made evil a part of his life, repaying G-d's kindness with an act of betrayal.

This is not a minor error, or one easily rectified. It is a mistake of grave import, impacting both upon his own future, and the spiritual direction of numerous lives. How can its effect be wiped away? Of what good is it to say 'I'm sorry'?

Let us try to understand the opportunity of Yom Kippur.

1

The Rambam categorizes Yom Kippur as "Ketz Mechila V'Slicha L'Yisrael" - "a period of forgiveness and pardon for the Jewish people".

The use of the term "Ketz" is puzzling. Literally, this means 'end' or 'extreme', and it usually refers to the end of time, not a particular occasion.

Apparently, it is the unique attribute of "Ketz" that empowers Yom Kippur.

The world is headed towards a particular goal. Hidden though this may be, it is this destination that gives life purpose and meaning.

"Hashem will be king over all the world, on that day Hashem will be One, and His Name will be One" (Zechariah 14, 9)

It is through Klal Yisrael that this message will be realized, and it is they who must bear witness to the honor of heaven's reign. On the day this truth is finally achieved, the end of time returns back to its beginning, the One G-d of creation.

"VaYehi Erev, VaYehi Boker, Yom Echad" - "...it should have written Yom Rishon, as was written regarding the other days: Sheni, Shlishi, Revii....why did it write Echad? Because on this day Hashem

was One in His world, for the angels were not created until the second day." (Rashi, Breishis 1, 5)

Yom Kippur is that day.

The tractate Yoma, as its title indicates, discusses this one day that is special and unique, separate from the mundane pattern of the natural, yearly cycle.

Chazal refer to this day as 'Yovel', or, alternatively, 'Alma D'Cheiru' - a world of freedom. On Yom Kippur of the jubilee year, the shofar is sounded, and all slaves are freed, property returned to their original owner.

"...and all will return to their place...." The Vilna Gaon explains that this description of Yovel is an allusion to Yom Kippur, a time where man returns to his rightful home, back to his origin, the day when G-d was One. Man is restored to his pristine state, the world of Gan Eden, the end that is the beginning. He senses once again the purity of a realm where sin is inconceivable.

It is here that forgiveness is granted.

Let us explain.

2

The centerpiece of the Yom Kippur service is the Avoda of the Kohen Gadol, as he prepares, on this one day, to enter the Kodesh HaKodashim.

Two goats are set aside, similar in age and stature. One is slaughtered for the sake of heaven, its blood sprinkled across the Holy of Holies, while its twin is sent sprawling over a cliff, a quick descent into oblivion.

These twin animals are symbols of man's dual nature. While part of man longs for holiness, at times he feels dragged towards sin and impurity, tugged in two directions.

Which of these two paths does he identify with?

The banishment of the one goat sent to its death is performed only subsequent to the sprinkling of its partner's blood in the Kodesh HaKodashim. The message is this: Only after man reaches his destination, the relationship with G-d that is the focus of life, can his sins be cast away.

It is not regret that begets forgiveness. Rather, it is the clarification of one's true identity that allows him to be cleansed of sin. With his real self apparent, sin is merely an unfortunate occurrence, a misdirected step that is now perceived as a foreign substance, an out of character mistake.

With this idea in mind, we can now understand why repentance is referred to as Tshuva. Where is man returning to?

"Do not cry for the deceased, nor bemoan him, but cry deeply for he who goes away, for he will return no more, to see his native land." (Yirmiah 22,10)

"Rav Huna said: This is one who commits an Aveira, and repeats it, the sin is now considered by him to be permissible." (Mo'ed Katan 27b)

" 'He will return no more': Implying that from this point and on, he will never do Tshuva." (Rashi, ad. loc.)

Tshuva means to come back home, a return to the land of our fathers. The man who is steeped in sin, complacently following the habits of yesterday, has no inner conscience to direct him, and he wanders aimlessly, a stranger in a foreign land.

The Kodesh HaKodashim is the bedrock of our existence, the earth from which we were formed. When man finally senses this truth, he suddenly becomes aware of the added burden that has been complicating his journey, and he disposes of the iniquity that he now despises, bemoaning the sin that led him astray.

This is no mere regret, he does more than beg for forgiveness. This is man's atonement, Yom Kippur, literally, the day of cleansing. Man wipes away the dirt that has clouded his life.

All this is hinted at in Lashon HaKodesh.

The root of Tshuva - the letters 'Shin' and 'Beis' of the word 'Shav' - marks the greatest extent that man can travel away from his source. But deep inside, an inherent holiness still remains, sacrosanct and pure, his personal Holy of Holies. His connection to this truth - the 'Alef', 'Mem', and 'Tuf' - encompass the alphabet, the totality of existence, and his temporary detour is superseded by the Emes that brings him home once more.

3

Let us take this one step further.

At the dawn of creation, the angels demand that G-d abort man's creation. G-d is the essence of truth, they cry, and man is aligned with falsehood, connected to a fantasy world far from G-d's command.

But, Hashem decides otherwise, casting Emes to the earth, decreeing that man reveal this truth on his own. Unlike the angels, coerced into accepting a truth that cannot be denied, the free-willed act of man, capable of choosing otherwise, reveals the G-dliness of a unified existence. In overcoming the fallacy of evil, he demonstrates that even the possibility of sin is a mere illusion, an artificial barrier masking the Hand of creation.

Consider this: a reasonable man looks at life, contemplating its varied options.

On the one hand, a life of religious observance holds out the promise of eternity, and a torturous oblivion to those who fail to heed its call.

On the other, a life of dubious value, the pursuit of temporary pleasures, satisfaction of each physical

urge.

What should a thinking man do?

All odds being equal, it makes no sense to take a reckless chance. Unsure as to the truth, one must err to the side of caution, careful to play by the rules, aware of the threatening danger.

In a world such as ours then, with the truth tucked deeply away, how is it that man has opted for the path of least resistance, heedless to the warning of G-d's law?

There is only one answer: Bechirah is also a creation, and a miraculous one. G-d has imposed the burden of choice upon the shoulders of man, and ironically, it is this option that enables him to ignore the perils of sin.

The very fact that man feels free to sin, contrary to all reason, is the greatest proof of Torah's abiding truth. Sin exists only as an option, it could not stand on its own.

Much of what we do in our daily life reveals nothing of our true selves. The daily trek to work or school is standard fare for every citizen of modern society. In order to express identity then, man must have a unique role of his own, something that reflects his internal feelings and emotions.

For many, this void leads to bizarre paths of self-expression. While one man paints his hair green, another pierces his body in a fatuous attempt to garner some attention.

Those who understand the ways of Torah recognize that man's real self is expressed within, the Bechirah that marks his relationship to G-d, the inner struggle of body and soul. Each act of choice is willful and deliberate, his personal gateway to the Holy of Holies.

In this conquest of himself, man finally recognizes that life contains no contradictions. Despite all appearances, G-d's will is one. Evil dissolves in a cloud of irrelevance. His sin thus forgotten and forgiven, man finally returns to G-d's outstretched Hand.

This relationship with his Creator is man's final stop, the Keruvim locked in eternal embrace.

The Word of G-d is speaking to him, and he hears its call.

A Gmar Chasima Tova to all.

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