

THE GREATEST GIFT OF ALL

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

The Greatest Gift of All¹ "I have forgiven, because of your words."² Three times in rapid succession we shout this line, precisely as we usher in the holiest day of the year. The phrase seems perfectly appropriate for our needs - just the message we want to hear. But is it not a bit presumptuous? Are we perhaps jumping the gun, projecting ahead of ourselves what we hope to secure in a period of intense avodah? Shouldn't these words come at the end of Yom Kippur, after a full day of fasting, teshuvah, vidui, and davening?)

Moreover, upon reflection the message conveyed by the phrase is not as positive as we think. ? Consider the words that follow immediately. "But as I live ... all the men who have seen My glory...and have tested Me these ten times and have not heeded my voice, if they will see the Land that I have sworn to give their forefathers - and all who anger Me shall not see it."³ Hashem's forgiveness was not a free pass. It came at a huge price! In essence, Hashem told those who had accepted the report of the spies that they were indeed forgiven, but they were going to have to pay a stiff penalty, one that would last many years.

Is this the Divine answer we wish to hear on Yom Kippur? Don't we really want to hear, "You are forgiven, the slate has been wiped clean, and the forecast for the coming year is sunny and bright?" We would like to hear an unequivocal, "Surely!" in response to our appeal for all things good for ourselves and our families. It is curious that lead off our Yom Kipur davening with an apparent, "You are forgiven - but with reservations."

Yet another familiar bit of phraseology seems to lose its luster when we ponder it. "Rabbi Akiva said, ??How fortunate are you, Israel! Before whom do you purify yourselves, and who purifies you? - your Father in Heaven!"⁴ What exactly does it tell us? Who else would we think could purify us?

We will make headway with these problems only if we break out of our usual thought patterns. We might start by recognizing that the chief function of Yom Kippur is not forgiving sin, or granting atonement, or sundry other ways of describing a slate wiped clean.

Why should Hashem announce a yearly amnesty, available to all fortunate enough to be Jewish? At all other points in the year, we deny that Hashem simply excuses wrongdoing - "Whoever claims that Hashem disregards wrongdoing, his own life shall be disregarded!"⁵ Does He break His rules on Yom Kippur?

Let's go back to the aftermath of the sending of the spies, and the people's rejection of the Land. HKBH's first reaction was, "I will smite them with a plague and annihilate them, and I will make you a greater and more powerful nation than they."⁶ In other words, Hashem was prepared to sever the special relationship with Klal Yisrael. He would abandon them, cast them off. His plans for history would continue through a new people, to be built from Moshe's progeny.

Moshe's tefilos succeeded in aborting that plan; Hashem relented, and said, "I have forgiven, because of your words." Hashem was ready to take Klal Yisrael back in, so to speak. Their sin would not be overlooked. It would be dealt with - but they would not be left standing outside in the spiritual cold. They would not suffer the fate they feared the most - utter rejection by their Creator.

What a relief for them to hear that they were no longer locked out of His presence! It is just as much a relief for us to draw on that response in the wilderness. We understand that it represented a pledge by Hashem never to fully abandon us, not then and not at any time in the future. Any set of circumstances, however unattractive, can be bearable to a believing Jew. Only one represents the ultimate horror - complete banishment from His Presence. We begin Yom Kippur by drawing on that episode over three thousand years ago. We remind ourselves that we stand inside, in His Presence, rather than outside. He has not and will not abandon us.

It is the perfect beginning - not end - of our Yom Kippur. With this reassurance, we can begin the avodah of the holiest day of the year. We can take advantage of its gift, and leave a day later on a more elevated plane.

In beginning that avodah, the words of Rabbi Akiva become important. Through our soul-searching in Elul, and as the Yemai HaDin draw closer, our malaise increases. Discomfort morphs into real fear. The greatest fear for many is that we have botched things so badly, that we - consciously or subconsciously - conclude that we cannot speak openly to G-d. From where will we find the chutzpah to stand before Him and plead for mercy once again? Sullied as we are by sin, caked in the mud of wrongdoing from head to toe, can we really walk into a Yom Kippur and function properly?

Rabbi Akiva provides the antidote to our paralysis. Before Whom do we seek forgiveness on Yom Kippur? Before our Father! Our Father will let us in the front door, even caked in mud! He will accept us with our inadequacies, just as he did in the infancy of our peoplehood. This is what fathers do, when their children stand at the doorstep, with only their eyes indicating that they seek reconciliation.

Reconciliation, then, is the magic word to describe the power of Yom Kippur. But this doesn't sound entirely accurate either. The Torah calls it a day of atonement, not a day of reconciliation. Aren't they very different? In truth, however, reconciliation and atonement are not distant relatives, but close cousins.

Tanna D'vei Eliyahu⁷ tells us that Hashem's cleansing of Jewish sins gives Him great joy. Think of a

king who becomes embroiled in a bitter dispute with his son. There is pain on both sides, although that of the son does not compare to that of the father. If father and son make up, their former bitterness helps propel their love to something stronger than what it was before their pained separation.

It is good for both of them to be together again. It is even better for the father than for the son. That is just part of what it is to bear children, to be a parent. Hashem reacts the same way, as it were. He savors the reconstituted bond between Himself and His people. He acts to bolster and support it. To make it work well, He throws in the ultimate deal-sweetener. He generously offers an amnesty to His beloved children, complete with atonement and taharah. Atonement is not the essence of the day, but its byproduct. Reconciliation remains the central theme; atonement follows in its wake.

Only a parent acts with such unstinting generosity. This is precisely Rabbi Akiva's point. Before whom do we purify ourselves? Before our Father! A father who forgives is not the same as a friend or neighbor who forgives. In the case of our Heavenly Father, the welcome-back of reconciliation brings with it the bonus of taharah.

But how do we get ourselves to show up at the door? Is simply living through the day of Yom Kippur sufficient? To some degree, it is. If we understand what it should mean, though, we can take far more away from the day.

Here, too, the words of Rabbi Akiva allude to the fuller answer. Before Whom do we purify ourselves? Before our Heavenly Father. Let us recall Who our Father is. Our puny minds are capable of grasping nothing of His essence. The smallness we feel can be painful. We might think of shrinking away, of drawing back from the Power of His Presence.

A better strategy would be to seek refuge, to find a place of safety. For believing Jews, not only is there such a place, but we are all familiar with its address. We escape not by running away, but by rushing headlong directly into Him. We submerge our smallness into His greatness. We negate our own importance, and reach out to cling to Him. By negating ourselves, by being mevatel our sense of self, He moves within range. Bitul is the key to achieving deveikus. (The Torah alludes to this in its description of the Yom Kippur avodah in the Kodosh HaKodoshim. "No person shall be in the Tent of Meeting when he comes to provide atonement in the Sanctuary."⁸ At this moment of encounter with the Divine, one ceases to be a person. He must translate his inadequacy and smallness into a self-negation that leads directly to deveikus with Hashem. He must leave the limitations of his humanity behind, and

The thought is not a new one. Maharal⁹ uses it to explain how Yom Kippur works. It is a day that the souls of Jews find their way back to their Source. Through bitul, the soul merges back into Hashem.¹⁰ Within Hashem, sin has no place. It is not that sin is left at the door. Rather, the neshamah is cleansed of the sin that adheres to it by now clinging to Something that simply does not allow sin to exist.

Interestingly, there is a parallel to this in an activity far more common than the once-yearly avodah of Yom Kippur. Rabbi Akiva goes on to add another image. "Just as a mikveh purifies the impure, so does HKBH purify Yisrael." Think of what we are doing and saying when we immerse in a mikveh. We submerge ourselves - completely and absolutely - in the water, becoming part of it. No small part of ourself remains outside. Before we enter, we remove any substances that interpose between our bodies and the water. Through the Maharal, we understand this idea. A mikveh purifies those submerged in it. On Yom Kippur, Hashem helps us submerge ourselves, lose our egos, nullify our sense of self through complete union with Him.

A jewel from the past: Great rebbes used to speak on erev Yom Kippur about mesiras nefesh, about giving our lives for Hashem. Why? What does dying for Kiddush Hashem have to do with Yom Kippur? They would plead with the tzibbur: "Why should we have to live though all sorts of consequences and punishment for our misdeeds? Visualize yourself in your heart of hearts as if you were giving your life for Hashem, and that will substitute for all sorts of unpleasantness!"

Mesiras nefesh is nothing more than a demonstration of bitul. It is a statement that one's own needs, interests, goals, desires - none of them matter, relative to what Hashem wants. It is the submerging of the most powerful instinct - survival - into the reality of Hashem. When a person achieves such bitul, there is no further purpose in punishing the sinner for his sins. By becoming one with Hashem, the sinner has disappeared completely and naturally - at that point, he ceases to be a man. His face shines with the radiance of the angels, but mortal man he is no longer.

What an outstanding opportunity Yom Kippur offers us - the ability to become nothing! Arriving there, we find not absence, but the ultimate Presence. We return to G-d in the mutual joy of reconciliation. Of the myriad Divine gifts of which we are conscious, it may be the greatest gift of all.

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1. Based on Nesivos Shalom vol.2, pgs. 171-172
 2. Bamidbar 14:20
 3. Bamidbar 14:22-23
 4. Yoma 85B
 5. Bava Kamma 50A
 6. Bamidbar 14:12
 7. Chapter 1
 8. Vayikra 16:17
 9. Derush l'Shabbos Teshuva, pg. 83-85. In the Beis Hamikdosh, this was demonstrated by taking the blood of the goat designated by lot "for Hashem," and bringing it into the Kodosh HaKodoshim. The blood represents the Jewish neshamah; bringing it inside makes the statement that the immediate source from which that neshamah is taken, and to which it now returns, is Hashem Himself.
 10. Curiously, the etymology of "atonement" supports this approach. The word comes to us through the Middle English "atonen", which in turn comes from "at one."

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