

A KINDER AND MORE TRUTHFUL NATION

by Rabbi Aron Tendler

When the Bais Hamikdash stood in Yerushalayim, 70 Korbanos were offered over the course of Succos. Those 70 offerings were brought on behalf of the 70 non-Jewish nations.

Succos follows Yom Kippur and celebrates what we hope will be our renewed relationship with G-d. Why do we offer Korbanos for the rest of the world on Succos if Succos celebrates our renewed relationship with G-d? What do the other nations have to do with the renewal of our relationship with G-d?

Having a relationship with G-d means willingly embracing our responsibility as G-d's "kingdom of priests and holy nation." As G-d's "kingdom of priests and holy nation" we must teach the non-Jewish world who G-d is and what their responsibilities are in relation to Him. That is why we were chosen from all the other nations. Chosen to be different, chosen to be noticed, chosen to be more aware, chosen to be more familiar, and chosen to represent Him to the rest of humanity. Renewing our relationship with G-d means rededicating ourselves to the reason why He chose us to be His "kingdom of priests and holy nation." As such, it is also our responsibility to represent the 70 nations to G-d; therefore, in the aftermath of Yom Kippur we bring offerings on their behalf. That is what our special relationship with G-d is all about.

The focus of Yom Kippur is recognizing G-d as the one and only G-d and accepting that His expectations for us obligate us to act accordingly. Accomplishing His expectations for us demands two steps. First we must renew our individual relationship with G-d by working through the inconsistencies of our personal performances as members of His chosen people. Secondly, we must collectively acknowledge and accept our national mission.

At the end of Yom Kippur we proclaim G-d as G-d. Seven times we declare G-d as the One and Only. Such a public declaration should only come after intense introspection and preparation. In fact, the month of Ellul and the Ten Days of Repentance (totaling 40 days and nights) were intended to be devoted to that intense introspection and preparation. The closer we come to Yom Kippur the greater the intensity and the focus should be. The days of Selichos, Rosh Hashanah, Tzom Gedaliah (fast of Gedaliah), and the final days leading up to Yom Kippur raise the pressure even more. Thrown into the intense preparatory mix is this week's Shabbos of Shuva.

Shabbos Shuva takes its name from the opening line of the Haftorah, "Shuva Yisroel, Ad Hashem Elokecha - Return O' Israel to Hashem" so logical to assume that the final Shabbos preceding Yom

Kippur is opportune for furthering the intensity of our preparation for Yom Kippur. Where can we find the message of these special days emphasized in the Haftorah of Shuva? Where is the individual and national message of accepting to be G-d's "kingdom of priests and holy nation?"

The Haftorah is assembled from three different places in the Tanach. The first part is from Hoshea 14:2-10. The second part is from Yoel 2:11-27. The third part is from Micha 7:18-20. Such a conglomeration of verses to create a Haftorah is unusual. For the most part, the Haftorah's are one or more chapters from a single book of Tanach (prophets) rather than being culled from three different books. Therefore, the assembly of the Shuva Haftorah must have been exceedingly deliberate.

For now let's start from the end. The last part of the Haftorah is three verses from the prophet Micha. Micha proclaims the uniqueness of G-d in His capacity to forgive sin and exchange His anger and disappointment for compassion and mercy. The final verse of the Haftorah then seems to shift in a different direction. "Grant truth to Yakov, kindness to Avraham, as You swore."

In many regards, truth and kindness are mutually exclusive. If we truly deserve punishment because we have sinned then we do not deserve G-d's kindness. In fact, we should pray that G-d simply be kind to us, grant us forgiveness, but forgo the truth stage. Why did Micha pray that we first be granted truth and then kindness?

We are told that each of the forefathers manifested and excelled in a different quality. Avraham excelled in Chesed kindness. Yitzchak e Gevurah ? strength and courage. Yakov excelled in Emes truth, why did it leave out the quality of Yitzchak in the final verse of the Shuva Haftorah? He asked G-d to grant truth to Yakov and kindness to Avraham. What happened to granting strength and courage to Yitzchak?

Finally, why mention the forefathers at all? Seemingly, forgiveness should be the consequence of our Teshuvah (repentance). Either we did Teshuvah or we did not. Either we deserve to be forgiven or we do not. As it is, the chance to even do Teshuvah is an unparalleled gift of G-d's loving kindness and compassion. It would be the height of chutzpah for us to expect forgiveness from G-d without individual and collective effort? What difference should it make that G-d "swore to the forefathers - either we repented or we did not? Besides, which promise did G-d make to the forefathers that Micha is referring to?

I would like to suggest that Shabbos Shuva, more so than any of the other preparatory days of Yom Kippur, is focused on the national mission to be G-d's "kingdom of priests and holy nation." Our mission was gifted to us because we are the children and heirs of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yakov. Starting with Avraham and Sarah, G-d promised that their children would be a blessing to the rest of the nations. Their children would continue doing the work that they had personally assumed on their own. Just as Avraham and Sarah volunteered their entire lives to introduce others to G-d; therefore, their children would carry on their work and do the same.

Yitzchak and Rivkah were less obvious in their interaction with the non- Jewish world and are described as more reclusive. Nevertheless, their entire lives were devoted to preparing Eretz Yisroel (the land of Israel) to aid their children in carrying on the work of Avraham and Sarah. (That is why Yitzchak was the only one of the Avos who could not leave Eretz Yisroel. His personal mission was linked to the land itself.)

Yakov and his four wives were far more exposed and integrated into the non- Jewish world. Surviving Lavan and Eisav was just the beginning. They then had to survive the negative and perverted influences of Canaan and Egypt and raise their children to be deserving of national choseness.

When Micha referenced G-d's promise to the forefathers as a reason for divine forgiveness, he was referring to the Jewish national mission of being G-d's "kingdom of priests and holy nation." True, G-d should not forgive us unless we are deserving of His forgiveness, or unless we are minimally willing to acknowledge G-d and begin the process of meeting His expectations. However, G-d promised Avraham and Sarah that their children would carry on their chosen work, and G-d always keeps His promises. Therefore, Micha reminds us that legally we should not be granted the chance to do Teshuvah. What we deserve we should receive, whether punishment or reward. However, because we are the children of Avraham and Sarah G-d allows an exception and gives us the chance to do Teshuvah. Micha is not suggesting forgiveness for naught. Micha is explaining the reason why we are able to do Teshuvah.

This also explains the sequence of first truth and then kindness. Micha never intended for G-d to forgive us unconditionally. To do so would be the worst example of leadership and parenting possible. G-d's forgiveness is predicated on our changing, or at least attempting to change. To do so we must know and accept our failings and inconsistencies. That is why Rosh Hashanah precedes Yom Kippur. First we have to know what we did wrong before we can sincerely beseech G-d for forgiveness. The Day of Judgment gives us our report card. Yom Kippur is when we promise to do better. First grant truth to Yakov and then extend kindness to Avraham.

However, preparing for Teshuvah and Yom Kippur is far more than our need to repent and be forgiven. Ultimately, Teshuvah and Yom Kippur are about being G-d's "kingdom of priests and holy nation." To accomplish our mission we must have a relationship with the other 70 nations. We must have common dialogue and mutual respect tempered by healthy distrust. There must be interaction and there must be protection.

In politics and diplomacy first impressions are everything. If the non- Jewish world perceives us as aggressive and determined at all cost they will quickly conclude that we would do anything and everything to accomplish our goal. They will be distrustful of our teachings and our motives and we will be accused of being deceitful and dishonest. We won't even have the chance to prove them wrong. We will not be given the chance to show our kindness and compassion. Instead, the 70

nations will conclude that we should be removed from the body of humanity because we cannot be trusted.

Yakov, the chosen among the chosen, excelled at truthfulness. Yakov understood and accepted that the mission of the Jew is predicated on the other nations perceiving us as being honest and truthful. Then and only then will they begin to trust us and what we have to teach and offer. That is why the Navi (prophet) starts with Yakov's truthfulness and then praises Avraham's kindness. However, the non-Jews should not see us as mighty and courageous. In fact, for the most of Jewish history we were not known for our strength and courage. We might be strong and courageous but it is quite irrelevant. As a nation we depend on G-d, "The Watchman of Israel neither sleeps nor slumbers." Regardless of our might and determination, "They come upon us with warriors and chariots while we come against you with the name of G-d!" In relation to G-d we must be strong and courageous. In relation to ourselves we must be strong and courageous. However in relation to the 70 nations we must be truthful and kind. That is why Micha did not reference the strength and courage of Yitzchak. His strength and courage had nothing to do with the rest of the world. It was solely for the sake of the Jews and Eretz Yisroel.

Micha was not describing all the characteristics of the Jewish people. Micha was describing how the non-Jewish world must perceive us if we are to be successful in teaching them about G-d. First they must be certain of our integrity. Secondly, they must appreciate and trust that our reasons for wanting to teach them are not for personal gain or reward. We do so because we are the children of Avraham and Sarah and our nature is to be kind. Therefore, trust us that what we teach is more for your benefit than ours.

May it be Hashem's will that the coming Yom Kippur grant us awareness and forgiveness and a renewed commitment to G-d to be truthful and kind as we do the work of being G-d's "kingdom of priests and holy nation."

Preparing For Yom Kippur

On Yom Kippur we read the story of the Ten Martyrs. Rabbi Akiva was among those ten great personalities who died sanctifying G-d's name. The Talmud in Berachos 61b relates that as Rabbi Akiva was being tortured to death his students saw him joyously reciting the Shema seemingly oblivious to the pain he was enduring. The incongruity of the moment was so apparent that even Tyrnus Rufus, the Roman commander who had ordered the execution, asked Rabbi Akiva how he was able to laugh in the face of such horrendous torture.

Rabbi Akiva's students, who were equally amazed at their teacher's endurance understood the moment to be far more profound than mere stoic courage and endurance. They asked their beloved teacher, "Is the Mitzvah of reciting the Shema incumbent upon an individual under such dire circumstances?" Rabbi Akiva explained. "The Torah commands us to love G-d with all our heart, with all our soul, and with all our belongings. All my life I wondered whether I would ever fulfill this

Mitzvah of loving G-d with all my soul. Now that I have been granted the opportunity of loving G-d with my very life should I not do so with joy and exultation?"

As a nation that has survived millennium of persecution and suffering, we have a fascination with how our heroes have died and how one should die. In the aftermath of the Pan Am tragedy, a Talis was found floating in the ocean. Tragically, Mr. Joe Miller obm, a "frum (observant)" man, was a passenger on that fateful flight and it was his Tallis that had been recovered among the wreckage. Mr. Miller's children confirmed that their father never placed his Talis and Tefilin (phylacteries) through the regular baggage service but always carried them with him on board. The problem was that it was nighttime when the flight crashed into the Atlantic and the Talis, which is usually not worn at night, should have been enclosed in its zippered velvet "zekel bag" which was inside a zippered plastic cover. How did Mr. Miller's Talis get out of its bag? The children surmised that in the six minutes prior to the crash when the passengers knew that the plane was in trouble their father, knowing that the situation was serious took out his Talis and put it on. That is the way a true "Eved G-d ? Servant of G-d" prepares for possible di Talis and immersed in Tefilah (prayer). It is fair to assume that Mr final words, like Rabbi Akiva's, were "Shema Yisroel..."

Moshe Rabbeinu said this week's Parsha in the final hours of his life. Moshe knew that he was about to die and the final two Parshios of the Torah, Haazeinu and Zos Habracha, record his last words, thoughts, and feelings. So, how did Moshe die? The final moments were recorded in the Medresh as "the kiss of G-d." However, far more fascinating than his actual death was the moments preceding that final kiss.

In last week's Parsha, Vayelech 31:2, Moshe said to the Bnai Yisroel, "I can no longer come and go, and G-d has told me that I am not to cross over the Yarden." Rashi explained that Moshe was physically capable of coming and going as well as crossing over the Yarden. As the Torah attests, (34:7) Moshe was 120 years old? not weakened and his vigor had not diminished." The meaning of Moshe's words, "I can no longer come and go" was, "I am not capable of leading you across the Yarden into the Promised Land because G-d did not give me permission to do so."

My Grandfather ZT'L asked, if Moshe was physically capable of coming and going but would not do so because G-d had not given His permission, why didn't Moshe simply say, "I can't lead you because G-d did not give me permission." Why did he say, "I am not capable of coming and going?"

My Grandfather ZT'L's answer illuminates Moshe's unique attitude at the time of his death. Moshe was able to come, go, and cross over the Yarden. He was the picture of health and he had the same prodigious strength as when he was in his prime. The reason Moshe said that he was not able to come and go is that he was not able to go against G-d's wishes. His understanding of G-d's mastery over every atom of the universe made it impossible for Moshe to not listen to G-d's commandments. For Moshe, not listening to G-d was tantamount to drinking poison or putting his hand in fire. The same natural aversion we would have to drinking poison or grasping a red-hot iron was the degree

of Moshe's aversion to not listening to the commandment of G-d.

Moshe may have been the only person in the world to have been granted power over the Angel of Death. My Grandfather explained that Moshe did not have to die. He was given free will over death! However, because G-d commanded him to die, Moshe willingly and joyfully ascended Har Nebo. As Rashi explains in Zos Haberacha 34:1, "To ascend Har Nebo should have required many steps but Moshe jumped them all in a single bound." For Moshe it was a last opportunity to do the will of G-d, therefore, he ran to do it!

So, how does such a man prepare for death? This week's Parsha is a glorious symphony of joyous exaltation. Moshe sang forth his love for G- d, his love for his nation, and his love for G-d's Torah. Moshe's strong voice must have enveloped the Bnai Yisroel in an uplifting embrace of intimacy and hope. As the Jews faced Moshe's eminent death and struggled with their own fears of abandonment and loneliness, Moshe's harmony and melodies reached in to the depths of the nation's heart and soul with love and longing.

So, how did Moshe prepare for death? Moshe Rabbeinu sang a song of creation and renewal, fear and hope, and the absolute certainty of G-d's love. Moshe called upon heaven and earth to witness the triumph of divine justice over mortal man. Moshe sang forth a challenge to his people to rise above their own limited mortality and become greater than the angels. "It is the name of G-d that I proc greatness to our G-d!" (32:3) So, how did Moshe prepare to die? He prepared himself wrapped in love, longing, obedience, happiness, joy, and song.

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