

YOUR PERSONAL INNER SANCTUM

by Rabbi Berel Wein

Though on Yom Kippur our prayers and thoughts are directed heavenward, the real Yom Kippur must take place within us. It is far easier to confess one's sins and shortcomings to an unseen God than to confess them truly to one's self. The Torah teaches us that the High Priest of Israel entered the holy sanctuary - the inner sanctum - of the Temple on Yom Kippur. The Talmud called that entrance of the Kohein Gadol, the High Priest, as entering "Lifnai u'lfanim." This phrase meant entering deep within. The rabbis of the Talmud were not only referring to the physical entering into the chamber of the Holy of Holies in the Temple in Jerusalem but they were obliquely referring to entering our own very most inner chambers of heart, mind and soul. All of us are bidden on Yom Kippur to enter "Lifnai u'lfanim." For without true self-examination and true commitment to self-improvement, Yom Kippur can, God forbid, be an exercise in futility if not even a meaningless charade. That is what the prophet Isaiah warns us of in the great haftorah of his that we read on the morning of Yom Kippur: "Is this the fast day that I ask of you? That you should bend your head to Me like a reed or that you should beat your breast with your fist?" All such public contrition is meaningless if it is not accompanied by a heartfelt conviction for self-improvement and for better behavior towards God and man consistent with such convictions and self-analysis.

Yom Kippur allows for such a deep entrance into one's inner self. It is a day of abstinence from food and drink and from other physical activities. It is an escape from the stress and pressures of our everyday lives and their attendant problems and frustrations. We always are concerned about others - family, friends, Israel, the world, the economy, etc. Yom Kippur gives us a chance to be concerned and preoccupied about ourselves - not in a selfish way but in a meaningful and positive fashion. It is the one day of the year that we are able to enter deep into ourselves and find meaning and purpose to our existence. This is not a simple manner. It may very well not be achieved in one day - even if that one day be the holy day of Yom Kippur. But Yom Kippur at the very least focuses for us the necessity of attempting to reach deep within ourselves in order to make our lives more meaningful and serene. The prophet Isaiah describes evil people as being tossed about in a raging sea of their desires and frustrations. The Lord wishes us to sail on calm waters of serenity, belief, commitment and holy behavior. The day of Yom Kippur can mark the beginning of that journey of tranquility and godly purpose. The day should not be squandered only in external behavior of piety and contrition. It should help us reach deep within ourselves to touch and polish our souls and be the day of repentance and renewal that God intended.

Gemar chatima tova.

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