

YOM KIPPUR

by Rabbi Berel Wein

The "one day" of the year is now upon us. Yom Kippur carries with it a fascination for all concerned. The concept of forgiveness, that transgressions can be forgiven, that words can be retracted and that actions and commitments can somehow be annulled is a most radical one. For after all, in our real world of mundane life we remember yet every slight and insult hurled against us even decades later. We may be able to move on from that experience but we remember it.

But Yom Kippur creates a situation that spiritually erases the experience. It allows for a clean slate unfettered by past transgressions and failures. This makes Yom Kippur the greatest gift that Heaven can provide for us while we are alive. This concept of forgiveness and starting again is in turn one of the greatest of the many gifts that Judaism has granted to humankind but, there are few gifts in life that do not also carry with it obligations and responsibilities.

Forgiveness on Yom Kippur comes with the requirement of introspection and resolve to do better and not to continue to repeat the errors of the past. In the listing of the sins that we recite in the Yom Kippur prayers emphasis is placed upon the words that we have uttered, the legs that carried us to transgression and the hands that are usually the culprit in our actual sinning.

The listing of these body parts, so to speak, is not done unintentionally or merely poetically or metaphorically. They describe for us the areas of our lives that demand constant improvement and care. As such they deserve a modicum of study and understanding.

Life and death depend on one's speech. It is difficult many times to be truly careful in speaking to others or most often about others. We often truly believe that talk is cheap. Yet talk can be very damaging. The rabbis stated that there are three victims of bad speech or even of careless speech. They are the speaker, the listener and the person that that was the subject of the remark or the speech.

Bad speech is thus a serial killer, a multiple murderer. We all misspeak at times, most of the time unintentionally, but nevertheless consequences follow. As one whose profession is to constantly speak and teach I am well aware of how easily statements can be made that are not completely accurate and many times not wise at all. I truly regret those misspoken words.

That is the hazard of my profession but it is a hazard for all of us as well. Care in speaking is a commitment that should be at the top of our list of improvements that we pledge to ourselves on Yom Kippur. And in many respects it is probably the most difficult commitment to achieve. We are

accustomed to speaking from our infancy so we do so almost out of rote. I once saw a sign that said: "Do not engage mouth unless brain is in gear." Truer words were never written or expressed.

Our legs move quickly when we are enthusiastic about where we are heading. King David said about himself that his legs almost automatically took him to the house of Torah prayer and study. Our legs carry us where we really want to go to. Thus they are a true measure of our goals and ambitions. They tell us what is important in our lives and what we truly value and prioritize. Our legs and where they carry us do not allow ourselves to be fooled by pious platitudes that we may sometimes utter.

There are times that we go places where we should not attend and participate in activities that are improper. Our legs brought us there and thus they revealed to us our true intent and uncovered weaknesses that we prefer to deny exist within us. How careful and measured our steps in life must be!

Yom Kippur also teaches us to guard our hands from doing wrongs. In haste and frustration we strike out at those that we feel have harmed or insulted us. The arch enemies of Moshe and the prototypes of evil men in the Torah, Datan and Aviram, are introduced to us in the Torah as two people striking each other. Unfortunately we live in a climate of violence, from the school yard, to the parking lot, to everyday life and domestic abuse. Basically Yom Kippur teaches us to maintain silence except where it is necessary to speak, walk slowly and in the right direction and to keep our hands to ourselves in almost all life circumstances.

Gmar chatima tova and shana tova,

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