

YOM KIPPUR - GETTING IN TOUCH WITH OURSELVES

by Rabbi Berel Wein

Yom Kippur is not only the day of holiness and forgiveness of sin - it is also the great day of hope and optimism. To a great extent each of us is born anew on that day. Each one of us has an opportunity to reexamine ourselves. Though we spend much of our prayer time admitting our sins, failures and shortcomings, we do so confident that these errors will be erased in God's compassion for His creatures. We confess to the entire litany of sins listed in our prayers so that we will be cleansed of all possible guilt and allowed to move forward unburdened by past impediments.

Long ago when I was an attorney in Chicago I knew a colleague who was a specialist in guiding people through the process of voluntary bankruptcy. He told me that most of his clients, on a consistent basis, were guilty of not listing all of their debts and liabilities in their original application for bankruptcy protection. They either forgot that liability, or for some strange but prevalent psychological reason, were too embarrassed to list that matter in their bankruptcy petition. It is one thing to default on a bank loan. It is another matter to do so to those who are near and dear to you.

When we ask for Divine forgiveness on the holiest day of the year, the litany of sins and shortcomings, which are the core of the Yom Kippur prayer service, comes to correct this psychological and emotional deficiency. We confess to every sin possible, because humans are able, if not even prone, to commit every sin possible. Our memories are selective and often times faulty.

Embarrassment before our Creator is a human trait inherited from Adam who displayed it in his confrontation with God at the dawn of human civilization. Therefore the complete listing of all possible sins is a necessary component to obtain forgiveness on Yom Kippur.

As mentioned above, Yom Kippur is a singular day of opportunity. Freed from the mundane tasks that encompass our existence all year long, we have time to think about the things in life that ultimately matter - family, community, tradition and our legacy to those that come after us. We honestly confront our mortality and human state of being.

We also think about our souls, that we have oftentimes ignored and neglected because of the pressures of our daily pursuits. We can recharge that reservoir of Jewish pride that lies within each of us - how special we are as individuals and as a collective nation. Identifying as a Jew, and understanding the demands and privileges that this identity bestows, gives one a true sense of importance and purpose in life.

The alienated, the scoffers, the confused and the ignorant will find little comfort for themselves on this holy day. But for those who seek to know themselves and thereby glimpse their Creator and their own immortality, the day of Yom Kippur is one of unmatched opportunity and wrenching satisfaction. It is akin to the renewal of an old and cherished friendship and of finding a long-lost object of emotional value. Our inner essence, uncovered by the holiness of the day of Yom Kippur is that long-lost valuable object; it is our old and best friend.

The physical deprivations that Yom Kippur demands of us are a reminder that nothing in life that is important and lasting can be achieved without sacrifice and some form of deprivation. Judaism does not preach a life of asceticism. The Torah looks askance at those who willfully deprive themselves of the permitted pleasures of life. The rabbis taught us that the rewards and benefits of life are commensurate to the effort and sacrifice that we invest in achieving these goals.

There is no free lunch in the physical and spiritual worlds that we inhabit. The mandated deprivations of our bodily wants on Yom Kippur serve to remind us of this truism. In the prayers of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur we confess that we risk everything in order to place food on our table. Yom Kippur and its bodily restraints teach us that we must also risk discomfort in order to attain any form of spiritual level and composure.

The absence of the chomping sound of eating, the gurgle of drinking and the clicking sound of sturdy leather shoes, allows us to hear the still small voice within us, the sound which our soul generates. It is that voice that elevates us and puts us in touch with our Creator. And that is what makes the day of Yom Kippur the supreme day of human greatness and opportunity - the holiest day of the year.

Shabat shalom Gmar chatima tova

Rabbi Berel Wein

Rabbi Berel Wein- Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com