

SAYING IS BELIEVING

by Rabbi Yochanan Zweig

Amongst the most stirring of the Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur liturgy is the prayer known as "unesaneh tokef". Equally heart-rending is the history behind the composition of the poem. The Ohr Zaruah records that the author of the prayer was Rabbi Amnon of Mainz, the greatest Rabbi of his generation, who lived in the ninth century.

The bishop of Mainz, holding Rabbi Amnon in great esteem, attempted to convert him. In order to stall for time, Rabbi Amnon requested three days in which to contemplate the matter. As soon as the words left his mouth, Rabbi Amnon became distraught and begged Hashem's forgiveness for the grave sin which he had committed. After three days, Rabbi Amnon refused to appear before the bishop, who then had him brought by force. When he refused to convert, the bishop ordered all his limbs to be severed, joint by joint. He was then sent home, along with his body parts, to die. Rabbi Amnon was able to cling to life until Rosh Hashana, and he asked that he be brought to the synagogue before Kedusha. When the cantor reached the recitation of the Kedusha, Rabbi Amnon asked him to wait. He then recited "unesaneh tokef" and passed away. Three days later, Rabbi Amnon appeared in a dream before the great Kabbalist, Rabbi Kolonymous ben Meshulam, asking him to ensure that all of Jewry would incorporate his prayer into their Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur liturgy[1].

What was Rabbi Amnon's sin and why did he only realize his mistake after the words left his mouth?

The Rambam lists the offenses for which a person must sacrifice his life, rather than transgressing them. Although it is axiomatic to Jewish law that preservation of life supersedes even the fulfillment of mitzvos, as is written in the Torah, "and by which he will live" - one should live by performing the commandments and not die, those transgressions which result in the desecration of Hashem's name require the highest sacrifice of man, his very life[2]. Among the transgressions mentioned is the performance of idol worship[3].

It could be asked why it is necessary to give up one's life in order to avoid this particular transgression, since idol worship is a sin of the mind. What would be the severity of the transgression if one were to simply go through the motions without the intention of serving another deity? The Rambam answers that even if a Jew does not actually believe in another deity, but goes through the motions, the perception that he was willing to serve the foreign god is the ultimate desecration of Hashem's name[4].

Rabbi Amnon initially reasoned that he could stall for time by not immediately responding to the bishop's proposal. However, when Rabbi Amnon saw that the bishop was satisfied with the knowledge that he was contemplating acquiescing to the bishop's demand, he realized that this perception alone, the perception that a Jew might forsake his Creator, was a desecration of Hashem's name.

The Sefer Hachinuch adds a new dimension as to why a person is required to sacrifice his life in order to avoid acquiescing to the demand that he worship another deity. It is not sufficient, writes the Chinuch, to believe in Hashem in thought alone. A person must verbalize this thought in order to concretize it. Conversely, if a person makes any statement which expresses a denial of Hashem's reality, even if he does not believe that which he is saying, it impacts negatively upon him and can imbed within him a doubt as to Hashem's existence^[5]. Consequently, as soon as Rabbi Amnon uttered the words implying that he would consider becoming an apostate, he sensed the impact that it had upon his own belief, and realized that he had erred.

1.Hilchos Rosh Hashana #286

2.See Sanhedrin 74a and Yoma 85b

3.Sefer Hamitzvos Mitzvos Asei #9, See Sefer Hachinuch Parshas Emor #296

4.Rambam ibid

5.Sefer Hachinuch Parshas Yisro #25