

# YOM KIPPUR

*by Dr. Nosson Chayim Leff*

5644

The Sfas Emes begins this ma'amar by quoting the Gemara in Yoma (2b): "Seven days before Yom Kippur, the kohein gadol (the High Priest) would be away from his wife [in preparation for the] one day."

So far, so good. But then the Sfas Emes moves on to a theme that seems totally unrelated to what came before. He tells us that Yom Kippur is unique. How? Because this is the one day in the year in which this world (olam hazeh) even distantly resembles the world-to-come (olam haba). How so? Because by not eating or drinking on Yom Kippur, we take on the behavior of mal'achim ("angels"--who do not eat or drink).

The Sfas Emes continues here to develop a new perspective on some features of Yom Kippur. He starts by noting another way in which Yom Kippur resembles olam haba. In the world-to-come, life is le'ma'ala min ha'teva (i.e., unconstrained by Nature). So, too, on Yom Kippur, we can more easily conduct ourselves in a way that defies normal rules of human behavior.

What behavior does the Sfas Emes have in mind when he says that, in principle, we can conduct ourselves in a manner that is "le'ma'ala min ha'teva"? He has in mind Teshuva ("return to one's true self"; repentance). For Teshuva requires changing one's behavior. And if you think about it, you will soon agree that such change is truly "above" Nature. How so? Because Nature would have a person's past misconduct continue, and thus reinforce itself. As the proverb says: "Hergeil na'aseh teva". That is, a person's habitual behavior becomes his (second) nature.

Into this context comes Teshuva, transforming the person's long-time way of living. Such change is "above Nature"; i.e., "supernatural". Hence, the close fit between Teshuva and Yom Kippur, the most "holy" (that is, le'ma'ala min ha'teva) day in the year.

Continuing in this vein, the Sfas Emes tells us that Yom Kippur is also the day in the year in which Teshuva is most feasible. In support of this statement, the Sfas Emes quotes a pasuk in Tehillim (139:16). (Before you see this pasuk, be aware that it is exceptionally hard to translate. Also, I am not sure whether the English translation makes it easier or harder to understand.) With this warning in mind, here is the pasuk: "Galmi ra'u ei'necha, ve'al sif're'cha kulam yi'ka'seivu; ya'mim yu'tzaru ve'lo echad ba'hem." (ArtScroll: "Your eyes saw my unshaped form, and in Your book all were recorded; though they will be fashioned through many days, to Him they are one.")

What is this pasuk saying? Read on and see.

The pasuk is saying: one day in the year is unique ("ve'lo echad ba'hem"). Unique in what way? Unique inasmuch as on that day, one can more easily break out of the mold within which we are constrained and to which the pasuk refers ("Galmi ra'u ei'necha..."). On which day of the year are we granted this special chessed that reforming ourselves is easier? Rashi -- quoting Yalkut Shim'oni on the pasuk -- answers: "Zeh Yom HaKippurim".

The Sfas Emes has given us new perspectives on some basic features of Yom Kippur. He has told us not to regard our fasting on Yom Kippur as a negative (e.g., as a punishment). On the contrary, he views our fasting on Yom Kippur in potentially positive terms. For ideally fasting can put us in the mode of the mal'achim, who neither eat nor want to eat. Our fasting on Yom Kippur makes that one day in the year in which we demonstrate (to ourselves) our ability to live in a state above our physical wants. That liberation can make it easier to aspire to live at a higher level of ruchniyus the rest of the year.

The Sfas Emes has also taught us not to see our fasting as a "stand-alone" mitzva. Instead, we should view our fasting as part of a comprehensive spiritual CARE package designed to help us reach a higher level of ruchniyus. The Sfas Emes articulated this possibility when he said that on Yom Kippur, we can experience some olam haba.

Thus, note the contrast between fasting on Yom Kippur and fasting on Tish'a Be'Av. Fasting on Tish'a Be'Av conveys a message of bereavement and mourning. By contrast, the Sfas Emes has told us to view fasting on Yom Kippur as an instance in which we strive to rise above our physical needs. The message conveyed can be the aspiration for a life with more spirituality. The difference in messages comes out clearly if we consider the very different moods of these two fasting days. Tish'a Be'Av is a sad day; Yom Kippur can be a happy day.

The Sfas Emes's other lesson focuses on Teshuva. Changing one's behavior -- i.e., Teshuva -- is the ultimate in le'ma'ala min ha'teva, and hence, very hard to do. But help is at hand. HaShem has designated Yom Kippur as the day in the year on which overcoming Nature -- that is, transforming ourselves by doing Teshuva -- is unusually feasible.

Before concluding, we must address one more question. We know -- from long experience -- that the disparate parts of a Sfas Emes ma'amar all fit neatly together. We may therefore wonder: why did the Sfas Emes begin this ma'amar with the quotation from the Gemara in Yoma? To a naive observer, that quotation seems totally unconnected with the rest of the ma'amar.

I suggest that we can find a possible answer if we have another look at the text: "Seven days ... the one day". Adding these two numbers gives us the number eight -- a number well known to indicate special kedusha. For example, bris mila takes place on the eighth day. Likewise, Shemini Atzeres is a day of unique kedusha. Most tellingly, the significance of the text -- "Seven days ... the one day" -- is clear if we consider another context in which the Gemara makes the very same statement. Chazal

make that statement in the context of the seven days of the Mishkan's inauguration. As with the kohein gadol and Yom Kippur, the seven days were preparation for ( Vayikra, 9:1) the -- you guessed it -- eighth day ("...bayom ha'shemini.")

What is special about the number eight? A cube -- the prototype of a "thing"; i.e., Nature -- has six sides. With its internal point, a cube has seven aspects. If Nature (teva) is seven, eight is le'ma'ala min ha'teva -- above and unconstrained by Nature. As we have seen, Yom Kippur is about Teshuva. Teshuva, in turn, is about trying to live "le'ma'ala min ha'teva". Similarly, fasting is also a prime feature of Yom Kippur. For a human being to abstain from food and drink for 26 hours is also behavior unconstrained by Nature.

Hence, we can appreciate the care with which the Sfas Emes crafted this ma'amar. Thus, he began by citing the passage from Yoma which refers to the number "eight". Referring to that number immediately brings to mind "le'ma'ala min ha'teva." And that reference sets the stage for the Sfas Emes's discussion of two features of Yom Kippur -- fasting and Teshuva.

---

Text Copyright © 2005 by Rabbi Dr. Nosson Chayim Leff and **Torah.org**.