

* A discussion regarding the history of *Vehasi'enu* in this context appears in Dr. Moshe Sherman's essay, "Simchas Yom Tov VeSimchas Rosh Hashanah," in *Kevod Harav*, Moshe Sherman and Jeffrey Woolf, eds. (1984).

The Day of Yom Kippur as the Medium for Atonement*

There is a uniqueness to the day of Yom Kippur which separates it from any other day of the year, in that the day itself is invested with the power to provide atonement. The Tefillah Zakkah meditation (the introductory Yom Kippur prayer read prior to Kol Nidrei) refers to the day of Yom Kippur as "a singular day in the year...a powerful day in the year." The notion of assigning such a profound capacity to a period of time (the "itzumo shel yom") was mentioned by the Rav on numerous occasions as a most sublime mystery; because of the centrality of this theme, the Rav raised this topic in virtually every one of his teshuvah derashos.

There is an anomalous view, formulated by Rabbi Yehudah Hanasi, also known simply as Rebbe, that the day of Yom Kippur provides atonement even if the individual does not engage in *teshuvah* (*Shevuos* 13a).ⁱ In his 1976 *Teshuvah Derashah*, the Rav clarified a specific detail discussed by Rashi regarding Rebbe's view – a detail that cuts to the very essence of Yom Kippur.

* BASED ON THE 1976 *TESHUVAH DERASHAH*

Invoking The Holiness of Yom Kippur

Rebbe states that atonement is bestowed to all on Yom Kippur, even if an individual ignores the most basic of Yom Kippur obligations. Among these imperatives, Rebbe lists fasting, abstaining from work, and “declaring (the day of Yom Kippur) as a holy convocation (*mikra kodesh*)”; even one who violates all of these receives atonement. Rashi (*Shevuos* 13a s.v. *lo kera’o mikra kodesh*) explains that the failure to “declare” Yom Kippur means: “one did not say the blessing [which appears in each Yom Kippur *Amidah*] of ‘[He who] sanctifies Israel and Yom HaKippurim.’”

Tosafos strongly disagree with Rashi’s interpretation. *Tosafos* argue that Rebbe must obviously be discussing a major violation if he groups this latter transgression together with eating and working. Yet, reciting such a blessing in the *Amidah* is not even Biblically mandated; how could Rashi possibly group such a relatively minor infraction with the far more severe violations of eating and working?

Rashi’s interpretation can be explained through an understanding of the *Kohen Gadol*’s *vidui* on Yom Kippur. The *Kohen Gadol*’s *vidui* reads, in part, “...Your nation has sinned before You...Please, through Your Name, Hashem, forgive the errors, iniquities, and sins...” (*Mishnah Yoma* 6:2). This version of *vidui* includes two fundamental components: acknowledgment of sin and request for forgiveness. In contrast, our *vidui* of today involves no request for forgiveness.¹ The request for forgiveness in our contemporary prayers does not appear in the *vidui* itself, but rather appears in the middle blessing of the *Amidah*, prior to *vidui*: “Our God and God of our fathers, pardon our iniquities on this day of Yom Kippur.” In this blessing, the holiness of Yom Kippur (the *kedushas hayom*) is the main theme. Why does the request for forgiveness precede the formal *vidui*, and not appear in *vidui* itself, in contrast to the *vidui* of the *Kohen Gadol*?

The placement of the request for forgiveness within the blessing of the *kedushas hayom* is most pertinent. The request for forgiveness

¹ The statement ... על חטא ועל כולם אלו-ה סליחות סלח לנו within the body of *Amidah* is a later insertion by the liturgist, and is not an intrinsic part of *vidui*.

does not originate in a vacuum, but is connected to the day of Yom Kippur and the atonement that the day affords. Although a simple request for atonement can be made any time during the year, the specific request for atonement through the day of Yom Kippur can only be made on Yom Kippur. Therefore, the request for atonement appears specifically within the blessing associated with the *kedushas hayom*.

The *vidui* of the *Kohen Gadol* reflects this emphasis: “Please, through Your Name, Hashem,² ii forgive the errors, iniquities, and sins...as it is written in the Torah of Moses, Your servant: For through this day He will atone for you, to purify you from all your sins; before Hashem you will be purified” (*Mishnah Yoma* 6:2). The *Kohen Gadol* must “remind” God, so to speak, that it is Yom Kippur, because the *Kohen Gadol* must request the specific atonement that is bestowed upon us through the day of Yom Kippur.

The statement “pardon our iniquities on this *Yom HaKippurim*” within our *Amidah* prayer thus parallels that of the *Kohen Gadol*: “Please, through Your Name, Hashem, forgive the errors, iniquities, and sins...for through this day He will atone for you...” We mention Yom Kippur as the very basis for the atonement request. In this blessing, we cite three Biblical verses to buttress our request:

Our God and the God of our forefathers, pardon our iniquities on this Yom Kippur. Wipe away and remove our sins and iniquities from before Your eyes, as it is said: “I, only I, am the one who wipes away your sins for My sake, and I will not recall your iniquities” (Is. 43:25), and it is [also] said: “I have wiped away your iniquities like a cloud and your sins like a mist – return to Me for I have redeemed you” (Is. 44:22), and it is [also] said: “For through this day He will atone for you, to purify you from all your sins; before Hashem you shall be purified” (Leviticus 16:30).

The final verse (“For through this day...”) is needed because

² This is the Yerushalmi’s version (*Yoma* 3:7), as quoted in *Tosafos (Yoma* 35b), and the version that appears in our own present-day *Avodah* recitation.

merely requesting forgiveness is insufficient: one must ask for forgiveness through the day of Yom Kippur. As a result, a specific verse must be used in which the day of Yom Kippur is invoked in this context.

We can now return to the original difficulty in Rashi's interpretation of Rebbe's statement. According to Rashi, the invocation of the *kedushas hayom* is not merely a Rabbinic ordinance. Since, according to Rebbe's assertion, it is the day of Yom Kippur that effects atonement even without *teshuvah*, one might naturally think at the very least that there must be a requirement to invoke the *kedushas hayom* in order to experience this atonement. According to Rashi's interpretation of Rebbe's statement, however, Rebbe maintains that not even this invocation is necessary to gain atonement.

As a result, according to the normative halachic opinion which maintains that *teshuvah* is indeed necessary to receive atonement on Yom Kippur (contra Rebbe), one can infer that there is in fact a requirement for such a specific appeal during the Yom Kippur service.

In fact, this requirement is evident not only in the *kedushas hayom* blessing of the *Amidah*, but in the prayer immediately following the *Amidah* of *Ma'ariv*. As explained in the previous chapter on the *Selichos* service, the collection of *Selichos* commences with the prayer called *Shome'a Tefillah*, "Hearer of prayer." The theme of *Shome'a Tefillah* is the proclamation of God as the Master of the cosmos as well as of Israel. The function of *Shome'a Tefillah* as an introduction to *Selichos* is based on the rule: "A person should first praise the Holy One Blessed be He and then pray" (*Berachos* 32a). Only after reciting this collection of verses do we reach the body of the *Selichos*, which contains at its core the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy. In *Selichos*, we make numerous requests: for the forgiveness of sin, the rebuilding of the Temple and Jerusalem, and for private needs as well. Prior to making requests of Hashem, one must first glorify Him.

Yet, on Yom Kippur night, immediately after the *Amidah*, just as we are about to recite *Selichos*, there is an intervening *piyyut* recited even prior to *Shome'a Tefillah* called *Ya'aleh*. Why does this prayer appear precisely at this point in the service?³

³ The Rav interjected that while growing up in his father's house, he learned that the Yom Kippur machzor is a text which must be studied with the same

As we conclude the *Amidah* prayer of Yom Kippur night, we are poised to recite the *Selichos* of Yom Kippur, consisting of repeated requests for atonement. In order for us to attain the atonement bestowed on Yom Kippur, this request must contain the element of *kedushas hayom*. We do not ask for the atonement which is accessible on any day of the year; we request the specific atonement of Yom Kippur. Yet, if one examines the wording of these supplications, Yom Kippur is not even mentioned. Instead, we recite the prayer of *Ya'aleh* to request that all the prayers of that evening and the next day should be accepted within the context of the *kedushas hayom* of Yom Kippur.

From the very first stanza of *Ya'aleh*, the theme becomes evident: "May our supplication rise from evening, and let our cry come from morning, and may our prayer be seen until evening." The repeated use of the preposition "from" would seem to be out of place here. A less stilted rendering might have read, "May our supplication rise *in* the evening..." Yet, in light of the above explanation, use of the preposition "from" is in fact most appropriate. In this prayer we are requesting that our supplications rise as a result of (or "from") the *kedushas hayom* experienced in the evening, and so on. The prayer *Ya'aleh* is therefore not so much a prayer as it is a declaration that we wish to couple all our varied requests for atonement and forgiveness on Yom Kippur with the transcendent *kedushas hayom*.

At this point, let us step back and ask: Why it is so critical that our request for forgiveness be coupled with the concept of the *kedushas hayom*? Additionally, the phrase used by Maimonides is: "The *itzumo shel yom* atones" – what precisely does *itzumo shel yom* mean?

The word *itzumo* means "strength." The potency of the day is subjective, directly proportional to the feeling of the Jew on Yom Kippur. To some, the *itzumo shel yom* can indeed be great and powerful. Its sheer greatness has the capability of shocking and traumatizing the individual; he feels as though he is standing directly in front of an all-embracing God. Yet, for others, the *itzumo shel yom* is almost nonexistent. Yom Kippur prayer continually invokes the *kedushas hayom* so that we are prompted to feel the *itzumo shel yom*. If one internalizes the truly awesome power of the day, he emerges from Yom Kippur as a different person.

depth as the most involved Talmudic *sugya*.

In this vein, the Rav cited his seminal work *Halakhic Man*, in which he described a childhood scene on the afternoon of Yom Kippur as follows:⁴

I remember how once, on the Day of Atonement, I went outside into the synagogue courtyard with my father [R. Moses Soloveitchik], just before the Ne'ilah service. It had been a fresh, clear day, one of the fine, almost delicate days of summer's end, filled with sunshine and light. Evening was fast approaching and an exquisite autumn sun was sinking in the west, beyond the trees of the cemetery, into a sea of purple and gold. R. Moses, a halakhic man par excellence, turned to me and said: "This sunset differs from ordinary sunsets, for with it forgiveness is bestowed upon us for our sins" (the end of the day atones).ⁱⁱⁱ The Day of Atonement and the forgiveness of sin merged and blended here with the splendor and beauty of the world and with the hidden lawfulness of the order of creation and the whole was transformed into one living, holy, cosmic phenomenon.

Rav Moshe Soloveitchik's entire being was interwoven with an appreciation of the profound significance of this particular sunset. When the consciousness is this powerful, the *itzumo shel yom* is indeed potent and the resulting atonement is all the more effective.

Invoking the *kedushas hayom* is not as important as experiencing the *itzumo shel yom*, and feeling the warm embrace of Hashem. The atonement one receives through the *itzumo shel yom* is directly proportional to the closeness one feels to Him. Through this experience the penitent provides the day with its "power."

The Blessing of *Kedushas Hayom*

The blessing in the *Amidah* that pertains to *kedushas hayom* on Rosh Hashanah starts as follows:

⁴ *Halakhic Man*, p. 38.

Our God and God of our fathers, rule over the entire world in Your glory, and rise up over the entire world in Your grandeur.... sanctify us with Your mitzvos and give us our portion in Your Torah.

There are two themes introduced here: God's sovereignty over the world and the holiness of the day. However, in the *Amidah* blessing of Yom Kippur the first theme is changed:

Our God and God of our fathers, pardon our iniquities on this Yom Kippur... sanctify us with Your mitzvos and give us our portion in your Torah.

Here, the aspect of God's sovereignty is replaced by a request for forgiveness. Yet, in the conclusion of this blessing we state:

Blessed are You, Hashem, the King, who pardons our iniquities and the iniquities of the entire House of Israel, and removes our trespasses every single year, King over all the world, who sanctifies Israel and Yom Kippur.

The theme of God's sovereignty reappears. If on Yom Kippur the theme was omitted from the body of the blessing (called the *tofes*), why does it appear in the conclusion (the *chasimah*)?⁵

The key to understanding this apparent anomaly in the prayer service of Yom Kippur lies in a passage from Nachmanides' commentary on the Torah.⁶ According to Nachmanides, Rosh Hashanah is associated with God's attribute of strict justice, *middas hadin*, to which the theme of God's sovereignty has a close connection. Nature exists according to rules that are fixed and immutable. These rules of nature are reflected in similarly immutable

⁵ Note that Maimonides, in his siddur, indeed maintained the sovereignty theme in the *tofes haberachah*, using the same wording as on Rosh Hashanah. The Tur (Orach Chaim 619) discusses a difference of opinion on this matter. Maimonides' opinion only begs the question, however: Why is this theme omitted in our version?

⁶ Nachmanides on Leviticus 23:24.

rules regarding punishment which comes as a consequence of sin. On Rosh Hashanah, when Hashem is manifest to the world as King, the world is judged and found wanting, guilty. On the simple basis of *din*, we have no chance for survival.

Yet Nachmanides also states that “Rosh Hashanah is a day of judgment in mercy, and Yom Kippur is a day of mercy in judgment.” The shofar which is sounded on Rosh Hashanah pleads for amnesty on our behalf. Mankind is indeed found guilty on Rosh Hashanah, but Hashem allows us to continue to live. The King is a ruler but He also grants favor. This is the meaning of “justice in mercy”: initially we are judged and found wanting, but the sentence is suspended. Despite this suspension, however, the sentence remains. Therefore, as Nachmanides outlined, Rosh Hashanah is a day of strict judgment that ends in mercy.

In contrast, Yom Kippur represents “mercy in judgment.” God does not render His verdict as a monarch, but as a father.⁷ A father does not generally render strict judgment on a son.⁸ On Yom Kippur, we emerge victorious in judgment, because mercy is an intrinsic part of the judgment. On Yom Kippur we are pardoned – our sentence is entirely removed.

The body of the blessing in the *Amidah* dealing with *kedushas hayom* performs the function of a request. Because of the father-son relationship of Hashem to His people on Yom Kippur, a request that He act as King (“rule over the whole world in Your majesty”) would be entirely inappropriate. We do not want Him to assert Himself as King and thereby hand down a strict verdict. However, the theme of sovereignty is indeed mentioned in the conclusion of the blessing,

⁷ This is the point of Rabbi Akiva’s use of the term “your Father in Heaven” (אביכם שבשמים) in his homily. In contrast, on Rosh Hashanah our approach to Hashem is in doubt, as is evident from our equivocation in the liturgical portrayal of our relationship: אם כבנים רחמנו כרחם אב על בנים, ואם כעבדים – “If [You judge us] as sons, have mercy on us as a father has mercy on his sons; and if [You judge us] as slaves, our eyes are fixed on You until You show us favor and proclaim our judgment.”

⁸ That is, unless he falls into the category of a “rebellious son” (Deuteronomy 21:18).

because this portion of the blessing is not a request but a description. In the conclusion of the blessing, the sovereignty theme does indeed appear (“Blessed are You... King over all the world...”) because the objective description of God on Yom Kippur must of necessity mention God as Sovereign. Yet even here we temper the description to include the fact that He also forgives sin. This is the meaning of the phrase used by Nachmanides, “mercy in judgment.”

Approaching Hashem

In discussing the *teshuvah* imperative, the prophet Hosea states: “Return O Israel unto Hashem [*ad Hashem*] for you have stumbled in your iniquity” (Hosea 14:2). There is a significant difference between the phrases “unto [*ad*] Hashem” and “to [*el*] Hashem.” The latter would suggest a return to the ways of Hashem. *Ad Hashem*, in contrast, means approaching Hashem Himself. One who repents must not only strive to do mitzvos, but must literally pine for Hashem.

The American religious community displays the aspect of *el Hashem*, but its experience of *ad Hashem* is sorely lacking. Judaism rests on three attributes of the individual, signified by the head, the hand, and the heart.

The head involves the intellectual discipline inherent in Judaism. An ignoramus cannot be a good Jew. The ideal of *talmud Torah* involves the highest levels of logic, the ability to think abstractly, analytically, and conceptually. The rigor of Torah learning is equivalent to, and perhaps surpasses, the most modern of philosophical methods. The learning of Torah is therefore nothing less than the sanctification of the mind through intellectual struggle.

The hand involves mitzvah performance. In this respect, many *ba’alei teshuvah* excel, being vigilant to keep those mitzvos that are difficult as well as those that are easy – all with precision. Through such performance, one’s hands are sanctified.

Although one can find the first two attributes in abundance today, it is the third aspect which is found wanting among contemporary Jews. The heart involves experiencing God emotionally. “God desires the heart” (*Sanhedrin* 106b). One must feel the emotional pull of the *Ribbono shel Olam* or, as William James put it, “the presence of the

Unseen.”^{iv}

Can a Jew genuinely feel His presence? Based on his own personal experience, the Rav said, the encounter with God is eminently possible. Man not only must believe in Hashem; he must feel God’s hand supporting his head during times of emotional turmoil. Potential *ba’alei teshuvah* pine for the sublime sense of hearing His whisper. The experience of *ad Hashem* involves the very real perception of contact, communication, and dialogue. This sensation is expressed in a passage in *Maseches Yoma*: “Great is *teshuvah* for it reaches the Heavenly throne” (*Yoma* 86a); through *teshuvah*, man can approach the throne of *Hakadosh Baruch Hu*.

NOTES

ⁱ The Rav discussed this difficult opinion in earlier *teshuvah* lectures. See *On Repentance*, “The Individual and the Community.”

ⁱⁱ The Rav emphasized that the word here is *בשם* and not *השם*. The "ב" used here is an instrumental preposition, indicating that the *Kohen Gadol* was requesting atonement through the Name of Hashem. [Note that the *Bavli* does not contain the "ב" in the *Kohen Gadol*’s *vidui*, but merely repeats the name of Hashem: *אנא ה' כפר נא*. The version that includes the preposition is found in the *Yerushalmi* (*Yoma* 3:7), and is cited by *Tosafos* (*Yoma* 35b) as an alternate reading of the *vidui*. The very same use of the preposition is emphasized in the phrase *כי ביום הזה יכפר עליכם*: our request is that the day of Yom Kippur be the atonement medium.

While discussing the parallel use of the preposition in these two contexts, the Rav made the following somewhat enigmatic statement in his 1979 *derashah*: “If the Name of Hashem provides atonement and the day of Yom Kippur also provides atonement, then it would therefore seem that the two are equivalent. It is interesting to note that [for this reason] the *gedolei chasidim* never used the appellation ‘Yom Kippur’; they referred to the day as *Yom Hakadosh*.” (See *B’nei Yissaschar*, *Chodesh Tishrei*, *Ma’amar* 8, for more detail regarding this custom.)

The Rav continued to explain that there were three prostrations performed during the *Avodah*, all in response to the invocation of the Explicit Name. However, the Explicit Name was not only invoked on Yom Kippur, it was also said every day at *Birkas Kohanim*. Why is there is no bowing during the invocation of the Explicit Name in *Birkas Kohanim*? Bowing is done only when the Name of Hashem is uttered for purposes of atonement. Therefore, in the *Nusach Ashkenaz* version of the

Avodah, there is no bowing at the time that the *Kohen* declares *לה' חטאת* over the *שעיר לה'*. The use of the Explicit Name in this case is only for identification purposes. [However, in the *Nusach Sefard* version of the *Avodah* known as *אתה כוננת*, there is indeed an additional bow at the declaration of *לה' חטאת*. According to this opinion, this declaration of the Explicit Name is also part of the atonement.]

With regard to the bowing itself, in the *Beis Hamikdash* the halachah was that one’s face had to be against the floor, an action which is only done on Yom Kippur, and only in response to the Explicit Name. Only those in the *Azarah* would bow; those outside (in the *Ezras Nashim*) did not bow; they only responded *ברוך שם כבוד מלכותו לעולם ועד*. Today, bowing during the *Avodah* recitation is only a custom. It is interesting to note that the Vilna Gaon and other Lithuanian *gedolim* did not allow the *Shaliach Tzibur* to bow at all, since not only is he prohibited from moving from his stationary position during *chazaras hashatz*, but the *Shaliach Tzibur* must constantly maintain his erect posture.

A subtitled video of this portion of the *derashah* can be found on the Ohr Publishing YouTube channel as “The 1979 *Teshuvah Drasha*: The Yom Kippur *Avodah* Recitation” (1:13:45-1:58:10).

ⁱⁱⁱ In the context of the previous discussion, it is appropriate to cite footnote 42 regarding this statement in *Halakhic Man*:

See *Shevu’os* 13b: “If a person ate a piece of meat [on the Day of Atonement] and choked on it until he died” [even Rabbi who says that the Day of Atonement atones for sins committed on the day itself would admit that the sinner in this instance would incur *karet*, would be cut off]. *Tosafot*, ad loc., states: The Talmud does not necessarily mean that the person must have choked on the meat [in order not to receive atonement], for the same law would apply as long as the person [who ate the meat] died before the end of the day atones. Thus, the Tosafists are of the opinion that the end of the day atones. [Therefore, if the person died before the end of the day, he does not receive atonement for his sin.] Rashi, however, states: “He committed his sin [until his death] so that not even one moment of the day elapsed after his sin.” His view is that the entire day atones. [Therefore, if even one moment of the day elapsed from the time the person committed the sin of eating until his death, that moment would bestow atonement for his sin.] See Rashba, ad loc.

^{iv} See “The Reality of the Unseen,” in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Random House, 1902), 53-76. The lecture consists largely of anecdotal information detailing subjective religious experiences, maintaining that “it is as if there were in the human consciousness a sense

of reality, a feeling of objective presence, a perception of what we might call 'something there,' more deep and more general than any of the special and particular 'senses' by which the current psychology supposes existent realities to be originally revealed."

The Avodah Recitation and The Conclusion of Yom Kippur*

The Temple service on Yom Kippur (the Avodah) was always an area of intense interest to the Rav. The intricate detail of the Avodah was the topic of a Yarchei Kallah, a series of three all-day lectures, taught by the Rav in the summer of 1971, as well as the primary topic in one of his last Kinus Teshuvah lectures given to the Rabbinical Council in 1979.

*In large part, the Rav's focus on the Avodah was clearly connected to his sheer mastery of the subject matter; the Rav had a tradition of staying awake every Yom Kippur night to study the Avodah ritual in detail with his father, Rabbi Moshe Soloveitchik zt"l. On a philosophical level, the Rav's interest in this subject may have been related to his abiding interest in the subject of holiness, an underlying theme in much of his writing. Holiness is defined by the Rav in *Halakhic Man* as "the descent of divinity into the midst of our concrete world." The encounter between finitude and infinity was most closely realized at the pinnacle of the Avodah ritual, the moment that the High Priest entered the Holy of Holies. Finally, on a simply personal level, the Rav related: "As a child, I keenly felt the kedushas hayom of Yom Kippur. The holiness of Yom Kippur was not merely a phrase; it was*

* BASED ON THE 1973, 1976 AND 1979 TESHUVAH DERASHOS