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5786 Yom Kippur  
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together as  
a community.**

## תשפ"ו Yom Kippur

Tomorrow night is Yom Kippur, and Jews the world over will be standing in Shul begging Hashem to forgive their sins. If one has tentatively received a negative judgment on Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, if properly observed, can repeal it.

How do we properly observe Yom Kippur? What is our goal, and what is it that we seek to achieve?

Through fasting and the day's extended special prayers, we try to cleanse ourselves of all of our sins and return to the pure state of a newborn. If we succeed, we will merit to be sealed in the "Book of the Righteous" and we will have secured for ourselves the best possible judgment for the coming year.

Although Yom Kippur is not an "all or nothing" proposition and one may receive only a partial pardon, the goal of erasing all of one's sins is very attainable, and that is what we should strive to achieve. This is because the day's design and structure are aimed at helping us accomplish that mission.

The first step, of course, is to prepare ourselves for the task.

The Torah teaches us (Leviticus 23:27):

(כז) אַךְ בְּעֶשְׂוֹר לַחֲדָשׁ הַשְּׁבִיעִי הַזֶּה יוֹם הַכִּפּוּרִים הוּא מְקַרָּא קֹדֶשׁ יְהִיֶה לָכֶם  
וְעִנִּיתֶם אֶת נַפְשֵׁיכֶם וְהִקְרַבְתֶּם אֲשֶׁה לַיהוָה

*27) But, on the tenth day of this seventh month, is the Day of Atonement; there shall be a holy convocation for you, and **you shall afflict yourselves**; you shall offer a fire offering to Hashem.*

On Yom Kippur we are commanded to afflict ourselves, but how do we fulfill this commandment? Will any affliction do? Should one walk

around with stones in his shoes? Or perhaps everyone should pick something that he finds afflicting and do it to himself on Yom Kippur?

Although the Torah's commandment as stated seems vague, the exact definition of "affliction" is explained in the Oral Torah that was given in tandem with the written Torah.

The Oral Torah teaches us that one is considered "*afflicted*" when he lacks five specific pleasures. They are:

- a. No eating or drinking
- b. No smearing oils to soothe the body
- c. No marital relations
- d. No washing for pleasure such as a shower or bath
- e. No wearing leather shoes

Hence, the "affliction" mentioned on Yom Kippur refers to abstaining only from those five pleasures.

A quick look at the list reveals the obvious purpose for these prohibitions: to minimize the body's physical pleasure on Yom Kippur. And by so doing, we are able to focus on our true identity. And what is that?

We read in Genesis (2:7) how Hashem created Adam:

(ז) וַיִּצְרֶה יְהוָה אֱלֹקִים אֶת הָאָדָם עֹפָר מִן הָאֲדָמָה וַיִּפַּח בְּאַפָּיו נִשְׁמַת חַיִּים וַיְהִי הָאָדָם לְנֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה:

*7. And Hashem G-d formed the man of dust from the ground, and He blew into his nostrils the soul of life; and man became a living being.*

Our Sages describe the soul as a "piece" of Hashem (חלק אלקה), (חלק נממל) so to speak, which they derive from the Torah's description of how Adam received his soul. The verse states: "*and He blew into his nostrils*

*the soul of life.*” Why does the Torah tell us how Hashem placed the soul into man? Why not just say, “And Hashem gave man a soul ...”? It is to teach us that the soul comes from Hashem Himself, a part of Him, so to speak. For, just as when one exhales, the air comes from within him (מאן) (דנפח מדיליה נפח), similarly, the soul that Hashem “blew” into Adam came from “within” Hashem and was part of Him.

The human being comprises a miraculous combination of an earthly body and a holy soul, “a piece of Hashem.” The soul is the real person, who comes to this earth with a specific mission of service to Hashem – to learn Torah and perform mitzvot in the way that only *he* can. The body is the host for the soul, which enables the soul to perform physical acts – mitzvot. The body to the soul is like the “spacesuit” to an astronaut. Just as a human being cannot survive on the moon and needs a spacesuit to simulate the earth’s conditions, so, too, the spiritual soul cannot function in a physical world and needs a physical body to give it the “hands and legs” that it needs to fulfill its mission in this physical world. When one has completed his mission, body and soul return to their respective sources.

Note that body and soul are diametrically opposed to each other. Because of the body’s earthly origin, by nature the human being is lazy and wants to do as little as possible. The body also wishes to indulge in the earthly pleasures that make it feel good. Because we immediately experience the physical pleasure of the moment, we easily gravitate toward these indulgences.

The soul, on the other hand, seeks to fulfill *its* mission - to obey Hashem’s commandments; but this always comes with a challenge. Whenever a person attempts to perform a mitzvah, the evil force in the world (the יצר הרע) rises up against him and tries to prevent him from doing it. With its selfish desires and urges, the body always demands

gratification, continually seeking all available pleasures. The soul, on the other hand, provides the rational voice of reason telling the body, “You can’t have that; it is prohibited, and it is not good for you.”

Such is the human condition; the struggle never ends. When the body wins, our spirituality declines and our earthliness expands; and when the soul wins, our earthliness declines and our spirituality increases. This constant tug of war underlies the purpose of our existence in this world, the goal of which is to overcome our earthliness so as to become more spiritual and come closer to Hashem. We accomplish this through learning the Holy Torah and performing the mitzvot, the spiritual “power pills” that Hashem has given us. With every word of Torah that we learn, and with every mitzvah that we perform, we become more spiritual and closer to Hashem. On the other hand, with every transgression, we become less spiritual and farther from Hashem.

There is no way of escaping this seesaw of life. Yet it is the process through which we grow; we must all go through ups and downs, times when we feel strong and times when we feel weak. The goal is to reach a greater high and reduce the low each time, so that we are always trending upwards.

One of the Rabbis gave a cute metaphor for this phenomenon. When one has an EKG, if the needle goes up and down, that means he is still alive. If it draws a flat line across the page, he is what they call a “flat liner,” and is dead. When one is engaged in trying to go higher, but also experiences lows, this means he is alive and doing what he is here to do. On the other hand, when one has no ambition to improve himself and stays the same all the time, he is spiritually dead, because he is not using his life for its purpose.

In observing Yom Kippur’s five prohibitions, we minimize the body’s needs, internalizing the idea that we are our souls and that the purpose

of our bodies is to help our soul fulfill its mission. This, in turn, frees us to concentrate on our spiritual self and reach higher spiritual levels on this holy day.

All seem to fit except the final one, wearing leather shoes. How does that constitute an “affliction?” Sure, a good pair of leather shoes feels good on our feet, but so does a good pair of Crocs! Why are we allowed to wear comfortable sneakers as long as they are not leather shoes?

Our Sages teach us that a person’s soul has various levels of holiness. During our existence in this world, we have access to only the tail-end, or the foot, so to speak, of our very holy soul. Because that part of the soul is considered the “foot” of the soul, our body, which serves as its vessel, is like its shoe.

And just as shoes allow our soft feet to walk on all types of terrain and on all types of surfaces that would hurt or dirty our feet, the body allows our soul to “walk” in a world that would otherwise be hostile to it.

We learn this concept from Moses when he approached the burning bush to receive his first prophecy. Hashem told him, “*Remove your shoes from your feet.*” Our Sages explain that Hashem was telling Moses, “For you to be capable of receiving a prophecy, you must remove your physical body from your soul. This way, your soul will be free and unfettered by your materialistic body, and you will be spiritual enough to receive a prophecy.”

We understand the shoe concept, but why is only leather prohibited?

To answer this question, we must return to the first set of clothing ever created (Genesis 3:21):

(כא) וַיַּעַשׂ יְיָ אֱלֹהִים לְאָדָם וּלְאִשְׁתּוֹ כִּתְנוֹת עוֹר וַיַּלְבִּישֵׁם:

*21. And Hashem God made for Adam and his wife garments of skin, and He clothed them:*

Hashem made the very first set of real clothing for Adam and Chava. These were regal, respectable garments made of skin, or fur, that completely covered their bodies, replacing the fig leaf aprons that they had made for themselves.

The Torah reports that before Adam and Chava ate from the Tree of Knowledge Good and Bad, they were naked but experienced no embarrassment from each other. This was because their bodies were holy with no evil in them. Upon eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Bad, the evil inclination entered their bodies, and they realized that they were naked. They now needed clothing to cover their bodies to minimize its prominence and the desire for it. Clothing would hide the body and allow the dignity and holiness of the soul to shine forth and help man understand who he really is. The human body is a beautiful thing, and man easily sees himself as his body and nothing more. This is why modest dress is so important in Judaism. It puts the materialistic body out of sight and out of mind. The Torah teaches us that we are a soul, and our bodies are merely the shoes that allow our soul to “walk” in this earth.

Today’s world does not subscribe to this perspective on humanity. Most people think that their body is who they are. This is why they are obsessed with making their body look as beautiful and as desirable as possible. Little or no attention is given to the soul, cultivating internal qualities such as fine character and virtue. The Torah teaches us to perfect our character – our soul – and to play down the body’s significance.

This is why only shoes made from animal skin are forbidden on Yom Kippur. The leather shoe, which represents the body and was the very

first material used to cover it, is reminiscent of the body's earthiness and its need to be covered. This is what we are trying to minimize on Yom Kippur.

There is another very important message here.

The Talmud (Berachot 17a) tells us that Rabbi Alexandri would add the following prayer to his daily prayers.

ורבי אלכסנדרי בתר דמצלי אמר הכי: רבון העולמים! גלוי וידוע לפניך שרצוננו לעשות רצונך ומי מעכב שאור שבעיסה ושעבוד מלכיות יהי רצון מלפניך שתצילנו מידם ונשוב לעשות חוקי רצונך בלבב שלם

*Master of the universe, it is revealed and known before You that our true desire is to do Your will, but what is standing in our way? The leaven in the dough (the evil inclination within us) and the society we live in (the evil influence from outside of us). Please save us from them so we may do Your will with all our hearts.*

Because our soul is our true essence and our body is an external agent, our *true self* naturally wants to connect to Hashem. We are unfortunately influenced by the evil inclination to indulge in the forbidden pleasures of the earth. Hashem knows very well what we are made of.

King David said in Psalms (103:14)

(יד) כִּי הוּא יָדַע יִצְרָנוּ זָכוֹר כִּי עָפָר אֲנִיחָנוּ:

14. *For He (Hashem) knows our evil inclinations; remember we are dust.*

Hashem, our Creator, knows what we are and the challenges and temptations that we face on a daily, moment to moment, basis. We have it from inside (*the evil inclination within us*) and outside (*the society we live in*). It is not that we are malicious or mal intentioned against Hashem.

It is because of our earthly component, the body, and the society we live in, that we do the things that we do. *“Hashem, please see me as I stand before you today, on Yom Kippur without my body pulling on me and influencing me. This is the real me. I want to do Your will.”* My sins are like dirt on my skin that isn’t part of me and can be easily washed off.

Although it is not easy to abstain from these five pleasures for 24 hours, we are prepared to do so to achieve the precious goal of receiving atonement on Yom Kippur.

Now we are in the proper physical state for Yom Kippur, and we are ready for the next and most crucial step, *teshuva* – returning to Hashem through repenting for our sins. When the Men of the Great Assembly composed the Yom Kippur liturgy, they incorporated into it the necessary ingredient to achieve *teshuva*, namely - וידוי – *viduy* - the confessional. It is said numerous times during the prayers, both in the silent devotion and in the chazan’s repetition.

The confessional lists, in alphabetical order, the most common sins that one might have transgressed. As one articulates each of the listed sins, he is instructed to reflect on his own actions to determine if he is guilty of that sin. If he is, he should sincerely regret having done it and accept upon himself never to do it again. With this, he has successfully done *teshuva* on that sin, as these are the three components of *teshuva*: (1) Confess the sin and owe up to it. (2) Sincerely regret having done it. (3) Pledge never to do it again. As one proceeds through the list, thinking about his actions over the past year and repenting for them one by one, he will achieve forgiveness for all of his sins.

This is the formula for emerging from Yom Kippur pure of sin with a completely clean slate for the future. First, we afflict ourselves and deny our bodies the pleasures that it craves. With that we express to Hashem and to ourselves that we understand that we are “a soul” not a body, and

that we are here on this earth to fulfill the mission of our souls. On this very solid foundation, we ask Hashem to forgive our sins by performing teshuva on each of them.

Add to this the awesomeness of the Yom Kippur day and Hashem's willingness to forgive us, and it is guaranteed that all our sins will be forgiven. As we conclude Yom Kippur, we can go home elated knowing that our sins have been forgiven, and that we can now start the new year with a fresh, clean slate.

As we look back at the momentous events of last year; the miraculous defeat of Iran with minimal casualties, the subduing of Hezbollah, crippling the Houthis, and the successful incursion into Gaza, we realize that these events were decreed on Rosh Hashanah of last year and sealed on Yom Kippur.

As we approach this Yom Kippur, our people face an existential challenge. Our brothers and sisters in Israel are fighting against an enemy that wants to kill every Jewish man, woman, and child, and tragically, we constantly hear of heroic soldiers falling in battle. Terrorist attacks continue unabated, and the hostages languish in Gaza, barely hanging on to life. Many of the civilized countries of the world have absurdly condemned Israel for genocide, and acts of violence against innocent Jewish people are increasing all over the world.

What judgment was rendered for the Jewish people on this past Rosh Hashanah? As we said in the Rosh Hashanah *amidah*:

וְעַל הַמְּדִינֹת בּוֹ יֵאָמֵר. אֵי זֶה לְחָרֵב. אֵי זֶה לְשָׁלוֹם. אֵי זֶה לְרָעַב. אֵי זֶה לְשָׂבַע

*And about the countries it will be determined, which will be subject to the sword, and which will experience peace, which will be plagued by famine, and which will have plenty ...*

Yom Kippur seals the judgment that was tentatively made on Rosh Hashana but has the power to repeal a negative judgment. If we act appropriately, we can have a major impact on this coming year's fate for our people.

When the Holy Temples stood, the Kohen Gadol – the High Priest-- and his performance of the Yom Kippur service was the focus of everyone's attention. He alone, through a finely detailed and exact protocol, was the Jewish nation's ambassador to procure forgiveness for their sins. Instead of going to shuls to pray, the people would go to the Holy Temple to be present during the special service.

The high point of the Yom Kippur service was when the Kohen Gadol would enter the Holy of Holies. Only on Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the year, could the holiest Jew of the nation, the Kohen Gadol, enter the holiest place on earth, the Holy of Holies.

What would the Kohen Gadol do in the Holy of Holies on this auspicious occasion? It would clearly have to be something extremely meaningful and important.

In the Holy of Holies, the Kohen Gadol would bring an offering of incense –קטרת – *ketoret*, as follows.

They would bring the Kohen Gadol a bowl of incense and a golden spoon. He would then dip his hand into the bowl of incense, take out a handful, and put it into the spoon. He would next take a pan of burning coals in his right hand, the spoon of incense in his left, and enter the Holy of Holies. Upon entering, he would place the pan of coals on top of the Holy Ark between its poles, pour the incense from the spoon back into his hand, and then pour it onto the burning coals. When the Holy of Holies filled with the smoke of the burning incense, he exited, walking

backwards. At a later point in the service, he would reenter the Holy of Holies to retrieve the pan.

Why is it so important to burn incense in the Holy of Holies on Yom Kippur?

Our Sages explain that *ketoret* (incense) symbolizes the Jewish people and it represents us at our best. The *ketoret* comprises eleven specific spices that, when blended, produce the most amazing fragrance possible. (The Talmud reports that no bride in Jerusalem ever needed to wear perfume because of the fragrance of the incense.)

The *ketoret's* uniqueness was that one of the blend's eleven spices, חלבנה - *chelbena*, had a foul odor when burned alone. But when mixed with the other ten, it contributed to the overall sweet fragrance. Hence, the eleven spices were really ten plus one.

This is a metaphor for the Jewish people. The Jewish congregation comprises many variegated people. There may be some Jews who “don't smell so great,” but when they join forces with the congregation (the other ten spices – like a minyan), they contribute to the congregation and make it greater. Their foul odor is incorporated into, and thereby *enhances*, the congregation.

This concept, that Jews of all types and stripes join to form one congregation, is so precious to Hashem that it epitomizes the highpoint of the Yom Kippur service, as the incense enters the Holy of Holies the essential place of Hashem's presence on this earth.

There is yet a greater significance to this, and here lies a secret for a good judgment for the Jewish nation. Because we are one congregation, and Hashem must decree a good judgment upon the holy and righteous in the congregation, all the others are brought along for the ride. Since they are one unit, they must all receive the same judgment.

This is what we can do for our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world. Understanding that we are one congregation, one unit, “The Jewish Nation,” we should have their welfare in our prayers, showing that we are one. This will hopefully bring them along with our good judgment.

The Code of Jewish Law (606:1) states:

(א) עבירות שבין אדם לחבירו אין יום הכיפורים מכפר עד שיפייסנו; אפילו לא הקניטו אלא בדברים, צריך לפייסו

*1) Yom Kippur doesn't atone for sins between man and his fellow man until he has appeased him. Even if his transgression was only with words, he must still appease him.*

Being at peace with our fellow Jew is an essential component of Yom Kippur. It is vital to our people that we be one. To that end, we must seek out those whom we have wronged and appease them by asking forgiveness for our act, to repair the relationship. Therefore, on the eve of Yom Kippur, it is customary to ask for forgiveness from anyone we have wronged. Yes, it's difficult.

On the flip side, our Sages teach us that when others have wronged *us* and come to ask *us* forgiveness, we should not be stubborn to forgive. We should immediately and sincerely forgive them. With this, we are modeling the behavior that we want Hashem to have with us when we ask Him for forgiveness. Because Hashem treats us the way we treat others, Hashem will be quick to forgive us as well. It is customary in many congregations that before Kol Nidrei the Rabbi announce, “Every person should wholeheartedly forgive anyone who has wronged them.”

Here we have the whole picture for complete forgiveness. We prepare ourselves for holiness by abiding by the five prohibitions, we beseech Hashem for forgiveness for our sins to him, and we rectify any

wrongdoings to our fellow Jew, melding us into one unit guaranteed of a good judgment.

May our sincere prayers, our teshuva, and our unity as one people rise before Hashem like the ketoret, sweet and pleasing. As we enter Yom Kippur, let us carry with us the awareness that our truest selves are our souls, ever yearning for closeness to Hashem. With forgiveness granted above and peace restored between us below, may we all be sealed in the Book of Life for a year of health, blessing, and peace for ourselves, our families, and all of Klal Yisrael.