**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT HAAZINU**

**YOM KIPPUR 5779**

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Motzaei Shabbat

The Rambam, in a famous passage in his Hilkhot Teshuva (2:2), gives the following definition of repentance: “The sinner abandons his sin, removes it from his thought, and resolves in his heart not to do it again… He also regrets the past…and the Knower of hidden secrets will testify about him that he will never again repeat this sin.”

The final component of this definition – that God “testifies” to the fact that the penitent sinner will never repeat his offense – has been the subject of a great deal of discussion by later writers. The *Lechem Mishneh* commentary raised the question of how to reconcile this remark with the doctrine of free will. If God “testifies” at the time of a sinner’s repentance that the sinner will never repeat the forbidden act, such that the person is guaranteed not to commit the violation again, then this might indicate that the individual has no free will to sin, contrary to one of the basic tenets of Jewish faith. (Seemingly, we might answer this question very simply by distinguishing between God’s knowledge of people’s decisions in the future, and their ability to choose, a subject addressed by the Rambam later in Hilkhot Teshuva.) Others have noted the question of what the Rambam’s comments say about the very common phenomenon of recidivism. If a genuine penitent later succumbs to temptation and repeats the offense for which he had repented, does this retroactively reveal that his repentance was worthless? From the Rambam’s comment, defining repentance as rejecting one’s sinful conduct to the point where God can attest that He will never repeat the act, we might indeed reach this conclusion. Such a conclusion, if correct, would certainly discourage many of us from undergoing the process of repentance, and take away our motivation to try, given that our failure at any time in the future to fulfill our commitment will render the entire process meaningless. (It should be noted that the Mabit, in his *Beit Elokim – Sha’ar Ha-teshuva*, 6, addresses this question at length and posits unequivocally that sincere repentance is valuable irrespective of the penitent’s future conduct.)

Some (see, for example, Rav Asher Anshel Schwartz, [*Ma’adanei Asher*, Yom Kippur, 5778](http://beinenu.com/sites/default/files/alonim/32_55_78.pdf), p. 2) have suggested finding the answer to this question in the Rambam’s choice of words in referring to God in this context. The Rambam refers to God not as “*Yodei’a atidot*” – “Knower of future events,” but rather as “*Yodei’a ta’alumot*” – “Knower of hidden secrets.” The point being emphasized is not that God knows the future, but rather than he knows what is in our hearts and minds. Thus, the “testimony” described here by the Rambam has nothing to do with the future, with the penitent’s success in permanently changing his conduct. Rather, it has to do with the person’s sincerity, the extent to which the sinner truly intends to abandon the forbidden act forever. As long as the penitent is indeed sincere in repenting, such that God, to whom all silent thoughts are revealed, can attest to his or her sincere desire to never repeat the act, then the repentance is valuable and accepted, regardless of the person’s success or failure in meeting the ongoing spiritual challenges that lie ahead.

Sunday

The Midrash (*Tanna De-bei Eliyahu*, 1) teaches that God experienced “great joy” (“*simcha gedola*”), so-to-speak, when He presented the command of the Yom Kippur observance, a *mitzva* which He gave to *Benei Yisrael* “with great love.” To explain the nature of this special joy, the Midrash draws an analogy to a king whose servants and family members were busy one day cleaning out the palace. As the king approached the entrance of the palace, he saw large piles of trash. He reacted with great joy and satisfaction, realizing that this was being done for the purpose of making the palace cleaner, more orderly and more extravagant.

The Midrash here beautifully captures the complex emotional experience of Yom Kippur, a day characterized by a unique blend of angst and exhilaration. On the one hand, the process of cleaning out a large, luxurious home, which has collected dust, garbage and clutter, is difficult, grueling and unpleasant. Seeing and smelling the large heaps of trash by the entrance should, on the one hand, be a cause of distress, as the beauty and grandeur of the building is concealed by the hideous display of refuse and the stench it emits. But the resident of the home, who understands what is happening, emphatically welcomes this unseemly sight. He rejoices over the process he sees unfolding in front of him, recognizing that the presence of trash outside the home means his home is now more beautiful and luxurious.

The Yom Kippur experience, too, is, at once, both agonizing and gratifying. We endure the discomfort and angst of collecting the “refuse” from our beings, thoroughly examining our characters and our conduct to identify the “filth,” the unflattering elements of our behavior, our bad habits and tendencies, our failures and our mistakes which we have preferred until now to keep conveniently buried in the deeper recesses of our consciousness. Acknowledging and confessing our “refuse,” admitting the presence of “trash” within our beings, is uncomfortable and difficult. At the same time, however, it is a source of unparalleled joy and satisfaction, as we realize that this cathartic process will have a significant “cleansing” effect upon us. The “heaps” of “trash” that we put forth on Yom Kippur, as we openly admit our failings, are unseemly, but we rejoice knowing that they are being eliminated from our beings, a process that will make us better people.

The process we undergo on Yom Kippur is, by design, unnerving and even painful, but it is one which brings the exhilarating feeling of growth and change, advancing us one step – or perhaps several steps – closer to being the people who we truly want to be.

Monday

In the *Vidui* section of the Yom Kippur service, in which we confess the various types of sins which we have committed and for which we beg forgiveness, we include a confession “*al cheit she-chatanu lefanekha be-yetzer ha-ra*” – “for the sin which we have committed before You with the evil inclination.” This confession, at first glance, seems very difficult to understand. Aren’t all our sins the product of the *yetzer ha-ra* (evil inclination)? Do we not commit every sin because of our negative impulses, instincts and tendencies? To what particular kind of sin do we refer when we confess the sins we’ve committed “with the evil inclination”?

One answer to this question is offered by Rav Yaakov Kuli, in his *Yalkut Mei-am Lo’eiz* (Parashat Bereishit, p. 121). He explains that we refer here to the particular tendency of excusing our misconduct by “blaming” our failings on our ingrained vices and weaknesses. We are given sinful tendencies for us to overcome them. The purpose of the *yetzer ha-ra* is to present us with challenges to surmount, to make us have to decide to act properly and live the right way. Often, however, we surrender too quickly, using our *yetzer ha-ra* – in its many different manifestations – as a convenient excuse for our wrongdoing. Instead of persisting in our struggle, we capitulate. Instead of recognizing and utilizing our power to conquer our vices, we yield to them.

According to this explanation, then, the confession of “*al cheit she-chatanu lefanekha be-yetzer ha-ra*” refers to all the times when we gave up on ourselves too easily, when we rashly and conveniently concluded, “I can’t do this” when we absolutely could do it. It refers to the many occasions when we convinced ourselves that we couldn’t do any better because we did not want to put in the effort to do better.

Rav Tzadok Ha-kohen of Lublin, in his *Tizdkat Ha-tzadik* (154), famously remarked that just as we must believe in the Almighty, we must also – just as importantly – believe in ourselves. Living a proper religious life is impossible if we do not believe in the human capacity to live a proper religious life, if we doubt our ability to withstand temptation, exercise restraint and discipline, and work hard. Part of our confession on Yom Kippur, then, is our acknowledging having insufficiently believed in ourselves, and having failed to appreciate just how much we are capable of and just how much potential we really have.

Tuesday

The Gemara in Masekhet Yoma (81b) famously establishes the obligation to feast on the ninth of Tishrei, the day before Yom Kippur. Noting the Torah’s implication that one must begin fasting already on the ninth of Tishrei (“*be-tish’a la-chodesh ba-erev*” – Vayikra 23:32), the Gemara states that one who feasts on the ninth of Tishrei is rewarded as though he fasted on both the ninth and the tenth – even though we of course fast only on the tenth.

Rav Yehoshua of Belz (the second Belzer Rebbe) is cited as explaining this obligation of feasting before Yom Kippur based on a prayer text that many have the custom of reciting during *mincha* on fast days. In this prayer, which is mentioned already in the Talmud, in Masekhet Berakhot (17a), we pray that the body fat we lose as a result of the fast should be accepted as our “sacrifice” like the fats of animals which were offered as sacrifices in the *Beit Ha-mikdash*. Rav Yehoshua of Belz noted that if this is indeed our objective, then we must ensure that our “sacrifice” is free of blemishes, just as an animal offered as a sacrifice must not have any physical defects. If before the fast we inappropriately overindulge, then the body fat we offer as our “sacrifice” is considered “blemished” and unsuitable as an offering to God. For this reason, God made it a *mitzva* to feast before Yom Kippur, so that the food we ingest before the fast will have been consumed in the context of a sacred religious act. It is thus considered “unblemished,” and suitable to be offered as our sacrifice before God on Yom Kippur.

On Yom Kippur, we extend ourselves to our furthest spiritual limits, withdrawing as much as we can from mundane, physical activity and devoting ourselves to prayer and repentance as entirely as possible. We show God – and ourselves – the extent of our dedication to Him, by going as far as we can in denying ourselves our most basic physical needs without endangering our health. The problem inherent in this day of withdrawal from physicality is the fact that we are incapable of living this way beyond Yom Kippur. Our exclusive spiritual focus on Yom Kippur might leave us with the mistaken impression that this is what we need to do in order to connect with God and serve Him properly, that anything less than the Yom Kippur experience is inadequate – or, in the Belzer Rebbe’s words, “blemished.” If we need to go to such an extreme to show our devotion to God, then this might indicate that our physical lives throughout the rest of the year are intrinsically “defective,” inappropriate and inconsistent with our religious ideals. And for this reason, the Belzer Rebbe teaches, we are given a *mitzva* to feast before Yom Kippur. This *mitzva* reminds us that our withdrawal from physicality on Yom Kippur does not mean that our engagement in physicality at all other times is unholy. By feasting on Erev Yom Kippur, we show that the Yom Kippur fast does not make the rest of our year “blemished,” that just as we can serve God through prayer, fasting and repentance, we can also serve God while enjoying the physical delights that the world offers, as long as we do so in the proper way and to the proper extent. Yom Kippur is the time to show just how far we can go in sacrificing for God; throughout the rest of the year, we show our devotion to God by refining and elevating our physical lives, incorporating even our otherwise mundane affairs into our life of complete devotion and subservience to our Creator.

Wednesday

The Mishna in Masekhet Ta’anit (26b) famously tells that “there were no greater days for Israel than the 15th of Av and Yom Kippur.” Due to the unique joy of these two occasions, the Mishna teaches, it was customary for bachelors to choose brides specifically on these days.

The Gemara (30b), in discussing the Mishna’s remark, raises the question as to the reason for the unique joy of Tu B’Av (the 15th of Av). Yom Kippur, the Gemara comments, is quite obviously a joyous occasion because of the special opportunity it provides to earn atonement. But why was Tu B’Av celebrated as a day of unique joy? The Gemara presents several different explanations for the significance of Tu B’Av, four of which share a distinct and unmistakable theme. One approach traces the history of Tu B’Av to the tragic war waged by the majority of *Benei Yisrael* against the tribe of Binyamin, a story told towards the end of Sefer Shoftim (20-21). This war nearly resulted in the complete eradication of the tribe of Binyamin, and during the hostilities, the other tribes vowed not to allow their daughters marry any man from Binyamin (21:1). When the conflict ended, the other tribes realized that their vow made it all but impossible for Binyamin to reproduce, such that the tribe was likely to disappear. On Tu B’Av, the Gemara teaches, the tribes found a legal loophole, noting that the oath was formulated in a way that applied only to the parent generation, and not to their children. And thus on this day, the tribe of Binyamin was saved, as it was determined that the remaining Binyaminite men were permitted to marry girls from the other tribes.

Another view in the Gemara traces the history of Tu B’Av even further, to the period of *Benei Yisrael*’s travels in the wilderness. After the sin of the spies, God decreed that the entire adult generation would perish, and not enter the Land of Israel. In the final of the forty years of travel, on Tu B’Av, it was determined that everyone included in God’s decree had already died, and thus the period of punishment had ended. Tu B’Av thus became a day of special joy.

Next, the Gemara cites a view attributing Tu B’Av’s significance to an event that occurred in the final years of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. The last ruler of the Northern Kingdom before its conquest by Assyria was Hoshea ben Ela, and the Gemara relates that Hoshea removed the guard posts which had for centuries prevented the kingdom’s citizens from going to Jerusalem. The founder of the Northern Kingdom, Yerovam ben Nevat, had stationed guards as part of his effort to complete the kingdom’s secession from the Judean Kingdom, ensuring that his subjects would no longer look to Jerusalem as their capital. These guard posts remained in place until the last years of the kingdom, when the final king, Hoshea, had them removed – on Tu B’Av – allowing his subjects to make pilgrimages to Jerusalem.

A fourth explanation associates Tu B’Av with the tragic defeat of Bar-Kokhba’s army, which had attempted to overthrow the Roman occupation of Judea several decades after the destruction of the Second Temple. The Romans defeated the rebels’ last holdout, in Beitar, killing many thousands of Jews and denying their loved ones the right to bury the dead. Finally, on Tu B’Av, the Roman authorities allowed the bodies to be buried, and thus this day became a joyous occasion.

The thread that clearly runs through these four incidents is that they all involve the improvement of a dreadfully tragic situation. The generation that left Egypt and promised to take possession of *Eretz Yisrael* never made it there, but on Tu B’Av, it became clear that their children would. An entire tribe was nearly eradicated, but on Tu B’Av it became clear that it would survive. The Northern Kingdom of Israel was captured and driven into exile, but only after a spark of unity between the two Israelite kingdoms was ignited for the first time in centuries. The defeat of Bar-Kokhba shattered the Jews’ hopes of restoring their sovereignty, and marked one of the deadliest calamities in Jewish history, but the Roman government’s unexpected change of policy with regard to the remains of the fallen shone a ray of light in an otherwise dark period of despair. All these events were occasions when a tragic situation showed signs of improving, however slightly.

It is in this vein, perhaps, that we should understand the connection between Tu B’Av and Yom Kippur, and why these are considered such uniquely joyous occasions. Yom Kippur, too, is a time when a tragic situation begins to improve. Our spiritually defective condition is, in a sense, tragic. We are endowed with a divine image, and have the potential for greatness, potential which has gone unfulfilled as a result of our mistakes and failures. And thus every sin, and every wasted opportunity, is truly a tragedy, and, moreover, every life is tragic, in that it has fallen so far short of what it could have become. Yom Kippur is a uniquely joyous day because we make a small but significant step towards improving our “tragic” situation. The intensive process of honest introspection, sincere confession and genuine resolve to improve, brings us a bit closer to perfection. And this process is thus the source of the unparalleled exhilaration of the Yom Kippur experience.

The special joy of Yom Kippur and Tu B’Av teaches us that we do not need a perfection, ideal condition to experience true happiness. To the contrary, if we make our feelings of joy dependent upon a state of perfection, we will almost never experience true joy. On Yom Kippur, we know that we will not come out of the experience perfect, with all our faults and flaws permanently and completely eliminated, but we nevertheless exult because we know we are improving, that we are taking a meaningful step forward – and this is, indeed, cause for unparalleled joy and celebration.

Thursday

In the introduction to the poem of Haazinu, Moshe proclaims that his words shall descend “*ke-se’irim alei desheh*” – like windswept rain falling upon grass (32:2; see *Targum Onkelos* and Rashi).

The *Sifrei*, interestingly enough, associates the word “*se’irim*” in this verse – which seems to refer to rainstorms – with the two *se’irim* (goats) used as part of the special Yom Kippur service in the *Beit Ha-mikdash*. As the Torah describes in Sefer Vayikra (16), and as we discuss in the *avoda* section of the Yom Kippur prayers, the Yom Kippur service in the *Mikdash* included two atonement goats, one which was offered as a sacrifice, and the other sent away into the desert east of Jerusalem. The *Sifrei* comments that Moshe compared his teaching to “*se’irim*” to indicate that “just as these goats come for sins and atone, similarly, words of Torah atone for sins.”

On one level, the *Sifrei* here simply intends to extol the value of Torah study, noting that it serves to atone for wrongdoing just as sacrifices do. But how might we explain the specific association between learning and the two Yom Kippur goats?

As mentioned, one of the Yom Kippur goats was sent out to the wilderness, where it was killed, symbolizing the banishment of *Benei Yisrael*’s sins, as the Torah itself explains (“*Ve-nasa ha-sa’ir alav et kol avonotam el eretz gezeira*” – Vayikra 16:22). The other goat was slaughtered as a sacrifice, and its blood was sprinkled in the *kodesh ha-kodashim*, the innermost sanctum of the *Beit Ha-mikdash*, where the *kohen gadol* entered to sprinkle sacrificial blood only on Yom Kippur. Together, the two atonement goats symbolize the process of banishing our faults and shortcomings from our beings, so we are capable and worthy of entering the *kodesh ha-kodashim*, so we can serve the Almighty with complete purity of mind and heart. Once we rid ourselves of our vices and bad habits, we are able to properly serve God.

By comparing Torah study to the ritual of the Yom Kippur goats, *Chazal* perhaps instruct that ridding ourselves of our faults is only one part of the *teshuva* process. Alongside our efforts to eliminate all that is wrong within ourselves, we must also work to fill ourselves with goodness. Focusing strictly on what we should not be doing is insufficient; we must also actively pursue knowledge and guidance so we know what we should be doing. The process of *teshuva*, of growth and self-improvement, includes both the “*se’irim*” – the banishment of our bad habits, as well as “learning” – developing good habits, imbibing the timeless values and teachings of the Torah so we live our lives each day the way we are supposed to live. Just as we earn atonement by working to rid ourselves of our negative tendencies, so do we earn atonement by constantly striving to learn and gain knowledge that will guide us along the path we ought to be following throughout our lives.

Friday

Moshe opens the poem of Ha’azinu with the declaration, “Hearken, O heavens, and I shall speak; hear, O earth, the words of My mouth!”

The commentators offer several different explanations for why Moshe here calls out to the heavens and earth. Rav Saadia Gaon explains that Moshe does not actually speak to the heavens and earth, but rather calls to the residents of the heavens – the angels – and to the residents of earth – human beings, addressing himself to the inhabitants of both realms. The *Sifrei*, cited by Rashi, explains that this introduction was intended to establish the eternal relevance of the warnings of this poem. As the heavens and earth exist forever, Moshe appointed them as “witnesses” to his having warned the people of the consequences of their betrayal of God, since they can provide “testimony” for all eternity. Rashi then proceeds to cite a different approach from the *Midrash Tanchuma*, explaining that Moshe assigns heaven and earth the role of holding *Benei Yisrael* accountable for their wrongdoing, by withholding rain (from the heavens) and produce (from the earth) should the people be unworthy of material prosperity. *Chizkuni* brings yet another explanation offered by the *Sifrei*, associating Moshe’s proclamation with the event of *Matan Torah*. The Torah was given from the heavens to *Benei Yisrael* as they stood on the ground pledging their commitment to it, and thus heaven and earth testify to our eternally binding obligation to live by the Torah’s laws and values.

An entirely different interpretation of these words is suggested by *Or Ha-chayim*, who proposes reading the terms “heavens” and “earth” in this verse as allegories for the nation’s leaders and commoners, respectively. *Or Ha-chayim* notes that the word “*ha’azinu*,” said in reference to the heavens, is constructed in the imperative form, instructing, so-to-speak, the heavens to listen. By contrast, the word “*tishma*,” which Moshe uses in speaking to the earth, is constructed in the future tense, describing what will happen, as opposed to issuing a command. *Or Ha-chayim* thus creatively suggests that Moshe instructed the “heavens” – the nation’s leaders – to heed his teachings, which will then naturally result in the “earth” – the rest of the people – abiding by his teachings. The leaders will set an example for others to follow, and thus Moshe needed only to instruct the leaders to heed his guidance. Rather than directly instructing the commoners to heed his words, Moshe instead addresses himself to the leaders, confident that once they act the right way, the rest of the people will follow suit.

The poem of Haazinu conveys harsh warnings to the people, castigating them for their future betrayal of God and describing the calamities that would befall them as a result. *Or Ha-chayim* here teaches us that such harsh warnings are not necessarily appropriate to be spoken to everybody. Many people are unable to heed this kind of message; they cannot be reached or affected by direct, severe admonition. The more effective means of inspiration and guidance, very often, is teaching by example, presenting a model of conduct that others will want to follow. Perhaps those in the “heavens,” who have already developed a heightened level of spiritual awareness and sensitivity, can be spoken to and instructed in a direct, explicit manner. But for others, those who are still on the “earth,” a less direct approach is far more effective. They are most likely to be inspired by an inspiring example of Torah values and Torah life, which they will be moved and stirred to seek to embrace.

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