**“We Have Acted Without Knowledge”**

**Based on a sicha by Harav Yehuda Amital *zt”l***

Translated by Kaeren Fish

The order of our Yom Kippur prayers opens with the verse, “And all the congregation of Israel are forgiven, along with the strangers living in their midst, for they acted without knowledge” (Num. 15:26). According to the Rema (*Orah Hayim* 619:1), this verse is to be repeated three times and, as with *Kol Nidrei*, it should be said while it is still day, since it pertains to the moments preceding Yom Kippur. Indeed, the connection between *Kol Nidrei* and Yom Kippur is an indirect one: a person cannot achieve complete repentance until he frees himself from the various vows and oaths which he has taken upon himself. It is man himself who is responsible for these, and they hinder his divine service. Thus, the actual prayer service of Yom Kippur commences with the above verse.

The use of this verse as the introduction to the prayer service raises two difficulties. First, as we know, the essence of Yom Kippur is our confession, where we say, “We have sinned, we have transgressed, we have committed iniquity.” But this verse declares, “We have acted without knowledge.” Why do we commence our prayers on Yom Kippur with a declaration that our transgressions were committed “without knowledge”? Second, *Hazal* explain that this verse refers to a *beit din* that erroneously permitted something pertaining to idolatry (see Rashi, v. 22). This situation, of course, is not relevant to us.

Nevertheless, it seems that this verse has a very important message for us. The paragraph in which it appears starts with the words, “If you err and do not observe all these commandments which the Lord has spoken to Moses” (Num. 15:22). Nahmanides writes:

This is the sacrifice of one who transgressed the entire Torah, but unintentionally, such as one who went and joined one of the nations and acts like them, and does not want to be a member of the Jewish people at all. And all of this is done unintentionally, such as in the case of an individual, someone who was captured as an infant and raised among the nations, and in the case of a community, where they thought that the time for keeping the Torah had passed and it is not binding forever…. Or they say, as is written in *Sifrei*, “Did God not say that we should act and receive reward? Let us not act and not receive a reward.” Or they forgot the Torah, like in the days of the wicked kings of Israel, such as Jeroboam, where most of the nation forgot Torah and mitzvot completely, and when the people of the Second Temple came in the Book of Ezra.

Nahmanides mentions dark periods when the Torah was abandoned or forgotten. Since the time of Nahmanides I do not know when the Jewish people faced such a situation, but in our generation we see it happening to an extreme degree. We can attest to a reality in which a community believes that “the time for keeping the Torah has passed,” both in Israel and in Western lands. There are Jews – a great many – who believe that the Torah is no longer relevant in our day. The complicated reality of our times, with waves of *aliya* from the former Soviet Union, forces us to confront not only the argument that the Torah is no longer relevant, but also a situation in which the Torah has been completely forgotten. With all our excitement over the miracle of the Jewish national revival, we stand uncomfortable and incompetent in the face of a Jewish community double the size of the generation that left Egypt which has forgotten the Torah altogether, and yet is returning to the Land of Israel.

And we wonder: How is it possible that Jews who are returning to the land, who never in their lives have known anything Jewish, are returning to Judaism without a single act of accepting the Torah, of circumcision or immersion in a *mikve*? Judaism is not just an ethnic identity; it also has content and a religious message. What is the message that kept these people Jews? The verse speaks of “the strangers living in your midst” – but even a stranger surely knows something about his Judaism!

The Gemara teaches:

A great principle is stated with respect to Shabbat: if a person forgets the essential law of Shabbat and performs many types of labor on many Shabbatot, he is obligated to bring only one sin offering. How might such a situation come about? If a child is taken captive among gentiles or someone converts to Judaism in the midst of gentiles and performs many forms of labor on many Shabbatot, he is obligated to bring one sin offering only. [Likewise] he is liable for one [sin offering] on account of [con- suming] blood, one on account of *helev*, and one on account of idolatry. (Shabbat 68b)

Rabbi Tzadok HaKohen of Lublin asks how someone could have converted among gentiles. If he knew nothing about Judaism, how could he convert? To this he responds:

The essence of Judaism is to be called Israel, as it is written, “One shall say, ‘I belong to the Lord,’ another shall call himself by the name of Jacob, and another shall subscribe with his hand to the Lord and call himself by the name of Israel” (Is. 44:5). If he has nothing else but the fact that he is known by the name Israel – that is enough…. The Jewish people are bound together as a single people, and will not be separated to join themselves to the nations, to be part of them.” (*Tzidkat HaTzaddik* 54)

Rabbi Tzadok teaches an important lesson. The fact that a person is a Jew sends a message to the entire world. The fact that a person declares he is a Jew, and declares the existence of the Jewish people – though people rise up in every generation to destroy it – is a major statement. This message proclaims to the entire world: there is indeed a God, the Creator of the world, as the prophet says, “You are My witnesses, says the Lord” (Is. 43:10). Even if those Jews do not know how to say *Shema*, their very existence declares, “Hear O Israel; the Lord our God, the Lord is one.” This is the most basic, fundamental principle of Yom Kippur: the idea that “we are Your nation and You are our God.” Before we make an accounting of our good deeds and our failures, what we have done and what we have not done, there is an underlying principle that arises from the verse, “And all the congregation of Israel are forgiven, along with the strangers living in their midst, for they acted without knowledge.” We gather and include all those unwitting sinners referred to by Nahmanides. This was true in every generation, and how much more so in a generation that witnessed the Holocaust and understands that even those who believe that “the Torah is no longer relevant” must be included as “unwitting sinners” and as part of the Jewish people.

This fundamental principle is important not only for those for whom being called a “Jew” is the sum total of their Judaism, but also for us. If we are judged strictly in accordance with our actions, who knows how the judgment will come out? However, we definitely have one point in our favor, and that is the spread of God’s name in the world. We begin the holy day with this idea, with the achievement of “for Your sake we are killed all the day long; we are reckoned as sheep for the slaughter” (Ps. 44:23). All of our suffering is due to that testimony that we give concerning the existence of God.

There is another aspect of this that is worthy of mention. “One generation shall praise Your works to another” (145:4). Each generation praises God in a unique way. Each generation tells of God’s miracles, recounting each new divine act in history. The Midrash teaches:

R. Yitzhak said, “In the year that the King Mashiah will be revealed, all the kings of the nations will provoke each other. The king of Persia will provoke the king of Arabia, and the king of Arabia will go to Edom, to take advice from them. Then, the king of Persia will come back and destroy the entire world, and all the nations of the world will quake and be terrified and will fall on their faces, and will be seized by pains like birth pangs. And Israel will quake and be terrified and will say, ‘Where can we go? To where shall we head?’ And He will say to them, ‘My children, do not be afraid! All that I have done has been solely for your benefit! Why are you afraid? Have no fear; the time of your redemption has arrived!’” (*Pesikta Rabbati* 36)

When the nations of the world quake and tremble in fright, it is only natural that the Jewish people also feel afraid, but God reassures us: “Do not be afraid!”

This speaks to a phenomenon that we have witnessed very recently, a worldwide phenomenon that caught us by surprise. Recently we lived under the illusion that the world is marching towards large multi-national confederations, with ethnic and national identities becoming less and less important. Nations were allying themselves with a regional superpower – the United States of America, Russia, and the European Union. In this environment there is a danger that Jews who forgot the Torah will also lose their basic identity of being called “Jew.” If there are no Russians, no Lithuanians, and no Ukrainians, only Soviet comrades, then there is also no need for Jews. When the world is moving away from national identities, there is a danger that some people may think that there is no longer any need to emphasize that there are Jews.

And now – this illusion is crumbling. Currently, we see a growing trend to emphasize ethnic and national differences throughout the world, if I am not mistaken, even in the multi-cultural United States. Who knows if God is not bringing all of this about for the sake of Israel, for the Jewish people that must acknowledge its Jewishness. We must praise God for this help clarifying that we are Jews who bear God’s name in the world and sanctify His name.

Our prayer service on this holy day includes the verse, “Please forgive this people’s iniquity in the abundance of Your kindness, as You have forgiven this people from the time of Egypt until now” (Num. 14:19). This verse concerns forgiveness for the sin of the spies. Moses, in praying that God forgive the people, expresses his concern for *hillul Hashem* – the desecration of God’s name that will result if the nations conclude, “It was because the Lord was not able to bring this people into the land which He swore to them that He has slain them in the wilderness” (v. 16).

The Torah reading for public fast days includes Moses’ prayer following the sin of the golden calf: “Why should the Egyptians speak and say, ‘In an evil [hour] He brought them out, to slay them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth…. Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Your servants, to whom You swore by Your own self” (Ex. 32:12–13). The fear of *hillul Hashem* concerns us as Yom Kippur begins, reminding us that our main role is to sanctify God’s name in the world.

Even if, Heaven forbid, we transgress, we cannot escape our destiny. The siddur of Avudraham explains the reason for reading the Book of Jonah at Minha on Yom Kippur:

To teach the whole world that no one who has committed transgressions can escape from God, as it is written, “Where shall I go from Your spirit? Or where shall I flee from Your Presence? If I ascend up into heaven, You are there; if I make my bed in *Sheol*, behold – there You are” (Ps. 139:7–8). (*Siddur Avudraham*, Prayers of Yom Kippur)

A person can try to escape his destiny in life, but he cannot escape from God. Not everyone is as fortunate as Jonah to have God speak to him directly, “What do you mean, O sleeper?” and prevent him from fleeing his mission.

We need the purity and purification of Yom Kippur in order to return to ourselves, to return to our destiny and to the knowledge that our mission is to sanctify God’s name in the world.

[This sicha is excerpted from Rav Amital’s book, [*When God Is Near: On the High Holidays*](https://www.korenpub.com/maggid_en_usd/when-god-is-near.html) (Maggid, 2015).]