

The Weekly 'Hi All' by Rabbi Jeff Bienenfeld

YOM KIPPUR & HAAZINU 5783

Yom Kippur - Our Unique Mission

At the conclusion of our private prayers for forgiveness and the confession of our sins, there is a paragraph that begins with the following enigmatic declaration: "My Gd, before I was formed, I was unworthy, and now that I have been formed, it is as if I had not been formed..." What can this enigmatic statement mean?

Rav Soloveitchik would favorably quote Rav Kook's explanation of this passage. "HaShem, You know that had I been born in an earlier generation, in an earlier era, I would have been worthless, unable to accomplish the specific assignment you placed upon me. Before I was created, I had no place in the order of things and events. Now, however, that I have been created at this time and in this place, I have been charged with a specific mission that only I can fulfill, precisely at this moment in history and in this milieu. But, alas, I must confess that thus far, I have failed miserably; I have accomplished so little of the task assigned to me. So much so, that I feel unworthy of having been born even in this generation. The miracle of my existence has

been wasted; it is as if I had never been created."

Quite a hard-hitting admission. But contained in this confession is an empowering truth and comforting Divine pledge. There is a reason we were born to live out our 120 years in this specific slice of time. HaShem has endowed us with a unique and singular set of abilities, talents and strengths to accomplish certain tasks that we, and only we, can complete. Each task and assignment is equally precious in His Eyes. To unfavorably compare our job with another's is nothing short of a betrayal of our unique mission. From the seemingly insignificant work of the street cleaner to the Torah study of the great scholar; from the simple cashier in the supermarket to the powerful CEO, each and every human being has a role to play. And because each one is needed, every person must be accorded the dignity and honor reserved for someone who faithfully sees himself as an EVED HASHEM (Gd's agent and servant).

Every Yom Kippur asks us - challenges us - to revisit our mission. Uncomfortable though it may be, we are pushed to reflect upon the reason we were created in the first place. What are we really supposed to be doing with the gift of life that Gd gave us? Yom Kippur comforts us with the promise that we can

recapture our true selves and rediscover the special path in life that was assigned to us and us alone. Yom Kippur declares that the moment we engage in this daring undertaking, HaShem will not only forgive our past strayings but - even more - He will help us regain our way, reclaim our mission, so that we courageously can go forward in fulfilling the sacred purpose of our existence.

Yom Kippur - the Little Brick

One of the obstacles in the t'shuva dynamic is the common tendency to set high goals in attempting to improve ourselves. Of course, inevitably when such lofty pledges meet the real world of habit and inertia in our own behavior, we rarely achieve anything near to what we resolved. In fact, one might even suggest that our reaching for these unattainable objectives ... and failing is - psychologically speaking - our way of consoling ourselves when we come away "empty handed" as the next Yom Kippur rolls around. "Well", you say to yourself, "I really did try to do this or that, but I just couldn't get there."

There is another way. The S'fas Emes of the great Gerer Chassidic dynasty offers this powerfully inspirational suggestion. When we bentch, we conclude the third blessing by saying, "Blessed are You, Gd, who builds Yerushalayim", with the verb, BONEI

in the present tense. Why not, more accurately state, "... who will build Jerusalem". After all, isn't this our wish given our daily prayer for the rebuilding of the Temple? To this question, the S'fas Emes asserts thusly: In every generation, every single Jew is challenged to add "one small brick" to that rebuilding of Jerusalem. No one generation will ever be so worthy as to merit the redemption. But when all the seemingly insignificant "little bricks", the good deeds of average and simple Jews over time combine, there will be a revolutionary tipping point, and the world as we know will never be the same. Hence, the present tense of BONEI is perfectly justified. Every day, each of us has the incredible wherewithal to "add a brick". Who knows? Perhaps my little contribution may make - literally - all the difference in the world.

T'shuva and Yom Kippur are not about declaring grandiose and extravagant plans for the coming year. Rather, it's the small kind deed, the little change in behavior, the sensitive words of caring, the smile, the consideration, the unexpected chesed - the little bricks - that are in our power to implement. They are all doable and golden in their impact on others. These changes will not make headlines and few will even notice. But, no matter! The brick has been placed; Gd has taken note, and you

will have joined in the most sacred and glorious of enterprises, the building of the Third Temple.

Never underestimate the power of that brick!

Yom Kippur - ITZUMO SHEL YOM

There is a peculiar stillness in the air as Yerushalayim prepares to rendezvous with the great day of Yom Kippur. If I had to describe that feeling in a word, I would say a certain holiness slowly pervades the city. The burgeoning spiritual intensity on Erev Yom Kippur is at once mysterious and very real. You sense something extraordinary and wondrous is about to happen. And while the awesomeness of the Day seems beyond our intellectual grasp, the arrival of Yom Kippur nevertheless fills us with a very palpable feeling that very soon we will be ushered into HaShem's Presence for an entire night and day.

This enveloping atmosphere is beautifully uplifting, uplifting in the sense that we are no longer bothered by the pettiness of the everyday. Rather, we begin to ascend to a level where the truly important things in life come into bold relief. We seem to be able to focus better and are inspired to reflect upon great and noble things. Yom Kippur approaches and we suddenly find ourselves aspiring and dreaming about what can be - about what we can be!

What indeed is the source of this exalted religious experience? On the pasuk in B'reishit (1:5), "And it was evening and it was morning, one day", the Midrash (B'reishit Rabba 2) comments that YOM ECHAD, ONE DAY was not just any day but, in fact, was Yom Kippur. What can this possibly teach us? Rav Soloveitchik provides a meaningful insight. On that day, HaShem created OHR, light. But that light had nothing in common with the physics of light as we know it. It was a divine spiritual light that interpenetrated all of creation, ultimately finding its way into man's soul. On Yom Kippur, that pure divine essence begs to be noticed. And so, we desist from all physical pleasures (eating, drinking, etc.). We are to resemble and act like angels, immersed in prayer, and swathed in an atmosphere of intense spirituality. In a word, it is that one day during which we can connect with G-d, and it matters little the number of sins we might have committed during the past year. It's the Day itself, the ITZUMO SHEL YOM. The Hebrew, ITZUMO, means strength. Gd, Himself, has invested this Day with an incredible potency. The very Day of Yom Kippur is possessed with such a power of atonement and absolution that its strength (ITZUMO) literally overflows even onto the day preceding - the 9th of Tishrei.

You see, that primordial light, created on Yom Kippur, tells us all that deep within the caverns of each of our personalities resides something untouched by sin, something pristine and holy, something quite precious and empowering. Yom Kippur has the spiritual power and voltage to "turn that light on". Everyone can return to his true essence if they only dig beneath the layers of their outer selves to discover the treasure hidden therein. If you can tap into that gold mine of uplifting and inspiring truths about yourself, you can transfigure your life and experience a sense of fulfillment of unparalleled meaning. This is the great promise of Yom Kippur!

Ha'azinu - Forgetting

Many years ago, Rav Zalman Shimon Dworkin zt"l, who was the acting posek of the entire Chabad movement shared with me an important interpretation on a phrase in this week's Parsha. I had the honor of meeting him on a number of occasions, during which time I asked him many halachic questions and sought his advice on numerous issues. He was brilliant as he was modest and humble. A true tzadik!

In verse 32:18, we read, in the standard translation, "You ignored the Rock Who gave birth to you, and you forgot G-d Who brought you

forth." Rav Dworkin, however, had a radically different understanding of the verse. Here is his paraphrase: "G-d created forgetfulness, and you chose to forget G-d." There is a great truth in this interpretation. Simply put, at times, it's a mitzva to forget - not Gd, of course - but other things. True, we are a People of memory. We are exhorted time and time again to remember. No other nation has the historical awareness and sweep as we do. And yet, there are many things that should simply be forgotten.

One of the obstacles that gets in the way of a meaningful Yom Kippur is precisely this. We carry around all sorts of baggage. Past hurts, grievances, memories of our mistakes, some shameful and embarrassing faux pas', recollections of failure and defeat, goals never met, dreams never pursued. This baggage - with its guilt-ridden gloom - drags us down. It deflates our self-esteem and convinces us that we "are who we are" and change is impossible. That baggage is just so much garbage! It needs to be jettisoned, forgotten. The point is we can recreate ourselves, not in spite of our past, but because of it! Yes, we are indeed our past, but it's a tragic error to allow that past to determine who you can be.

So, this Yom Kippur, imagine, if you will, that you can be reborn, unencumbered by any past. Imagine

exciting options, great opportunities, and wondrous adventures. And then, seriously consider - rationally strategize - how you can make things happen anew. And when that unwelcome voice from years past rudely interrupts your spirited planning with the depressing news of "been there done that; whom are you kidding", you need to shut that voice down and forget, forget the voice with its depressing reminders, forget and boldly move forward. Indeed, at times, it can be a mitzva to forget! And that can be your Yom Kippur chizuk.

May HaShem grant each of you and all your loved ones with blessings of good health, happiness and peace. G'mar Chasima Tova! 🙌