

What's the greatest
mitzvah, and the
worst sin?

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Weekly Parsha

Haazinu

RABBI BERNIE FOX

"My lesson shall drop like rain.
My saying shall flow like dew –
like wind-blown rain upon the
herb, like a powerful shower
upon the covering of vegetation."
(Devarim 31:2)

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Yom Kippur



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Weekly Parsha

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Rashi explains that in this pasuk Hashem is describing the effects of the Torah upon its students. In the first portion of the pasuk, the Torah is compared to rain and dew. What is the message transmitted through this comparison?

Rashi comments that although the earth needs rain in order to sustain life, rain is not always appreciated. Rain can cause inconvenience. The traveler does not wish to battle inclement weather. A farmer whose harvested crops are still in the field is not pleased with a summer storm.

Dew does not have the life-sustaining power of rain. However, it is more appreciated. Dew provides moisture, without inconvenience. [1]

Rashi understands the pasuk to contain a fundamental lesson. A few preliminary observations are necessary to understand this message. Some activities only provide future reward. Often a person is required to make a tremendous sacrifice in order to secure this future benefit. A person may work fifty years, in a despised job, in order to someday enjoy a dreamed-of retirement. A parent will sacrifice and endure hardship for years in order to provide the best opportunities for his or her beloved child.

In contrast, other activities provide only immediate and fleeting benefit. These activities offer no long-term gain. For example, an extra-rich dessert is great for a moment.

But the consequences are not as pleasant. The pleasure of a drug-user epitomizes this type of activity. The pleasure of the high is short-term. The long-term effect of the activity is a shattered life.

Rashi understands rain to represent an activity with a long-term sustaining effect. Dew, in contrast, symbolizes activity providing immediate joy and benefit. He explains the pasuk to mean that the Torah combines the benefits of rain and dew. Like rain, Torah sustains life. Through observance and study of the Torah we can achieve eternal life in Olam HaBah – the world to come. Yet, the Torah also has the quality represented by dew – immediate gain. We are not required to sacrifice happiness in this life. Instead, the Torah enhances our temporal existence in the material world.

How are these two outcomes accomplished? The Torah provides us with guidance in our everyday affairs. It teaches us a way, an outlook and discipline designed to help deal with the challenges of life. At the same time, the Torah

encourages the development of the human's unique spiritual element. This element is immortal and survives the temporal material world.

The second portion of the pasuk makes reference to wind-blown rain falling upon an herb and a powerful shower falling upon the mantle of vegetation. Again, the pasuk is teaching some lesson about Torah. But we must determine the meaning of the various symbols – wind-blown rain, the individual herb, a powerful shower, and the mantle of vegetation. The association between the symbols also requires analysis. The wind-blown rain is associated with the individual herb. The powerful shower is associated with the mantle of vegetation.

Again, Rashi provides a hint to the interpretation of the pasuk. He comments that the wind-blown rain strengthens the herb it strikes. In a similar way, the study of Torah strengthens the student.



Rashi seems to understand this second portion of the pasuk as a describing two manners in which Torah can be transmitted. These two methods are described as wind-blown rain and as a powerful shower.[2] Apparently, each method has its application. One method is applicable when dealing with the individual – the single herb. The other method is required when teaching a large group – the mantle of vegetation.

Torah is taught in many forums. It may be transmitted from rebbe to talmid – teacher to student. Even in the classroom the rebbe works with a small group of students. In this situation the teacher has the opportunity and responsibility to recognize the individuality of the pupil. Torah is also transmitted in larger forums. In the synagogue the rav must inspire a congregation. He cannot study the reaction of each individual as he addresses his congregation. He must speak to the group. The rebbe deals with the single herb. The rav must communicate with the entire mantle of vegetation.

Each of these situations requires a unique approach. The rebbe's success depends upon assuming the role of wind-blown rain. The teacher must be demanding. High expectations cause the student to grow and become a scholar. The rebbe can be demanding because each individual student is carefully observed. This allows the teacher to provide measured demands corresponding to the abilities and needs of the pupil.

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The rav of a kehila – a congregation – does not have this luxury. He must use a different means to achieve his goal of effectively teaching the lessons of the Torah. He must present his thoughts with power and impact. This requires a clear, sharply-defined message. In this way he inspires his congregation through demonstrating the wisdom and beauty of the Torah.

“To Hashem do you act this way? You are a foolish nation without wisdom. He is your Father and the One who established you. He made you and placed you upon a foundation.” (Devarim 32:6)

The pasuk addresses a future generation of Bnai Yisrael. It is confronting a people who reject Hashem and His Torah. This rebellion against the Almighty and His law is characterized as the action of a nation of fools.

Rashi comments that such people are foolish for they forget the past. The history of the Jewish people serves as testimony to the Almighty's relationship to Bnai Yisrael. The nation has no wisdom for it fails to foresee the outcome of its behavior. The rejection of Hashem can only result in disaster.[3]

Rashi's comments correspond a famous teaching of the Sages. The Sages ask, “Who is wise?” They respond, “One who sees the future.”[4]

This teaching requires some analysis. There are many characteristics that can be associated with a wise person. Why did our Sages specifically associate the wise person with the ability to foresee the future? Another problem stems from the strange phraseology adopted in this teaching. No human can see the future. We can see only the present. Regarding the future, we predict likely outcomes.

The present we perceive with our senses. These sense perceptions are very real. No normal person would purposely walk in front of an oncoming train. We have no doubt as to the reality of the speeding train, and no doubt that crossing its path will result in disaster.

In contrast, we can perceive the future only as an idea. The future cannot be seen through the senses. For this reason the future often seems less real than the present. Mere ideas do not strike us as quite as definite as sense perceptions. It is difficult to take ideational material completely seriously. However, this denigration of the reality of ideas is an illusion. Ideas are just as real as sense perceptions.

Our Sages did not regard a person as wise simply as a consequence of the accumulation of data. A wise person is an individual who is guided by wisdom. This means that the reality

of ideas is as definite to the wise person as input received through the senses. The Sages characterized this quality by referring to “seeing” the future. The future, although only an idea, is as real as the present that is seen through the senses.

The message of the pasuk is now clearer. The rejection of the Almighty will inevitably result in a negative consequence. Why would the people expose themselves to this outcome? The pasuk responds that this behavior reflects a lack of wisdom. The people will become attached to the material life. They will strive to fulfill their immediate desires. These desires will seem very real and pressing. The future consequences of this behavior will be disregarded. The future only exists as an idea. To a people steeped in materialism an idea will seem illusionary and vague. The result is that the future will be ignored in order to enjoy the present.

“Among the repentant behaviors are for the repentant individual to constantly call-out to Hashem with cries and supplications. And one should give charity according to one's ability. One should distance oneself from one's sin. One should change one's name. One is stating that I am a different person. I am not the person who did those inappropriate actions. One should alter all of one's actions so that they are positive and just...” (Maimonides, Mishne Torah, Hilchos Teshuva 2:4)

Maimonides describes the behaviors of the repentant individual. One of these behaviors is somewhat confusing. Maimonides suggests that the repentant individual should alter all of his or her actions. One must be positive and just in all actions.

In order to understand the difficulty regarding this suggestion, a short introduction is required. What is repentance? Repentance is not accomplished through a temporary cessation of the sinful behavior. Teshuva is much more demanding. Teshuva requires that a person make a complete break with the sinful behavior. This complete break is only achieved through a commitment to never again commit the sin. Maimonides' position on this issue is emphatic. He explains that a person who confesses a sin and does not resolve to completely discontinue the sinful behavior has not fulfilled the mitzvah of teshuva. He compares this person to one who immerses in a mikveh – a body of water – while holding an impure object. The immersion cannot affect a state of purity until the person releases the impure object. Similarly, the purification and process of teshuva cannot

proceed without a complete break from the sin. This complete break is expressed in a firm commitment to abandon the sinful behavior.[5]

Maimonides suggests that the repentant individual must alter all of his or her behaviors. Does this mean that repentance must be all-encompassing and include all aspects of a person's life? Is Maimonides suggesting that the repentance from a specific sin requires a person to repent from all other inappropriate behaviors? This is not a reasonable interpretation of Maimonides' words. As we have explained, teshuva requires a complete and permanent cessation of the sinful behavior. Maimonides cannot intend to suggest that repentance from a single sin requires that we permanently abandon all other wrongdoing. Such a requirement would render teshuva virtually unattainable!

We must conclude that Maimonides is not suggesting that the repentant individual must permanently discontinue all other inappropriate behaviors. Instead, Maimonides is acknowledging the value of change that is not accompanied by complete commitment. The repentant person should endeavor to discontinue all inappropriate behavior. It is true that such a drastic undertaking will not result in a permanent cessation of all wrongdoing. That is an unrealistic expectation. Nonetheless, temporary change has a value. The sincerely repentant person should appreciate that value as seek change – even temporary change.

This interpretation of Maimonides' suggestion is implied by his carefully chosen wording. He does not suggest that the repentant individual should repent from all other wrongdoing. He suggests that repentant person alter his or her behavior. There is a tremendous difference between altering a behavior and repenting from the behavior. An alteration is achieved even through a temporary suspension of wrongdoing. Repentance requires a complete commitment to permanently discontinue the behavior. This analysis confirms our interpretation of Maimonides' suggestion. He is acknowledging the value of positive change – even temporary change. ■

[1] Rabbaynu Shlomo ben Yitzchak (Rashi), Commentary on Sefer Devarim 32:2.

[2] Rabbaynu Shlomo ben Yitzchak (Rashi), Commentary on Sefer Devarim 32:2.

[3] Rabbaynu Shlomo ben Yitzchak (Rashi), Commentary on Sefer Devarim 32:6.

[4] Meschet Tamid 32a.

[5] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Mishne Torah, Hilchos Teshuva 2:3.

Yom Kippur

YOM KIPPUR MESSAGE

As we discussed last week, these 10 Days of Repentance offer us an opportunity to be cleansed of our sins. King Solomon taught that since we do not know the day we die, we should be careful to remove ourselves from sin daily, so we might receive our afterlife without punishment. He taught this in a metaphor, "At all times let your clothes be white..." "White" means that we are clean from sin.

With this in mind, at this time in which God seals our fate, it is urgent that we use these remaining hours wisely. We can secure a year of happiness, health, wealth...and life. But we must follow God's directives. We must reflect, repent, seek forgiveness from others we have wronged, fast, and attend Temple services...how ever long they might be, it is just one day. One day, and we can secure God's favor and blessings.

And not only can you secure your own fate, but show the utmost concern for your family and friends. Inform those who might not fast and pray, why they should. It might take some discussion, but their lives are worth your best attempt. I did this today with a friend, and surprisingly, it paid off. He might go to temple and he said he would fast. Perhaps it is our displayed concern for others, that emotional gratification they feel when we express our care, that they are touched and moved enough so as to respond and fast...even if only to reciprocate our care. Use your relationship with others to touch them with your concern, and you too might be surprised as was I. So make a few calls and urge others to join you. You can then explain to them the service as it progresses, and even make the day enjoyable for him or her.

Now, as we are to repent in these last, precious hours, I will briefly mention some of the hurdles we each might face in our repentance. Once identified, a problem is sometimes halfway solved.

Our Mortality

First of all, we must be convinced of the numerous, prophetic verses reminding us that God knows all our thoughts, and holds us accountable. We get so used to our daily lives, we don't truly feel things will change...we don't feel we will die, and have to answer for our sins. Now is the time to accept our mortality. Truly realizing this, we must feel very concerned for ourselves. So become convinced that all God's words through the prophets are 100% true. Previous prophets, who led Israel subsequent to Moses, endorsed all the following prophets' writings, which exist. The prophets were also endorsed by God's miracles and His prophecies.

So we will receive punishment for our sins, as the Torah and Prophets teach.

Therefore we must repent to avoid this. In contrast, if we eat on Yom Kippur, we lose our afterlife. If we do not join an assembly of ten men in prayer, we are not subject to God's greater providence over the nation, which receives far greater favor, than His providence over the individual. We must be truly concerned not to forfeit that great reward.

Our Wrong

We must reflect on why our personal sins are wrong. For without this knowledge, we will repeat the sin, and add to our injury, and loss. So, either learn why a given sin is wrong and change yourself, or teach another who needs your knowledge. Once we recognize the damage we self-inflict, we will desire to repent.

Our Self-image

Many times, it is our self-image that prevents us from repenting, or seeking forgiveness from others. We do not wish to admit error. But we must not let ego cause us to forfeit our afterlife. For the shame we suffer here for a few moments will insure an eternity of good. Conversely, if we seek to maintain our ego, we

thereby sacrifice something in the afterlife. It is simply not worth the fleeting, momentary ego to lose something eternal.

Additionally, we must not seek social accolades or insulate ourselves from embarrassment, in place of God's approval.

Last week we cited the Talmud that teaches that all our needs are determined during this time. The Torah teaches that God forgives during this time.

I wish all of you a meaningful conclusion to these days of repentance, and a day of fasting and prayer that secures the good that God wishes for you. And reach out to others so we all share in a good, happy, healthy and wealthy year.

Let us also remember that the meaning behind all the physical blessings is to enable our greater involvement in what brings us the most enjoyment and meaning: Torah study. It may very well be that the avoidance of Torah in place of seeking greater wealth will in fact diminish our wealth. Since Torah study and teaching is the greatest mitzvah, our lack of it must bring us the greatest punishment. It is certainly true that the lack of the greatest area of Torah knowledge – knowledge of God – has brought Jews to all forms of idolatry, including the many Jewish forms that we have discussed all year. And God has punished us many times for this. The very first generation after Joshua committed idolatry...we do too. From Kabbalistic mysticism, deification of Rebbes as holy, miracle workers, praying to the dead, and red bendels...to Amen groups, challah baking and other superstitions, we see that true Torah fundamentals concerning what God is and how He works, are severely lacking.

It is up to today's leaders to risk unpopularity, and teach Torah fundamentals. The Torah teaches that the leaders are punished, when they do not correct individuals. I therefore hope that we all seek truth, and teach truth, to seek God's favor, not the favor of man.

—Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim

THE YOM KIPPUR SACRIFICES

Many people live by the principles of "modernity", the feeling that "anything that preceded me must be outdated". Some espouse the opinion of "animal cruelty" in connection with Temple sacrifice. Additional rejection of the sacrifices of Yom Kippur may arise due to their association with a long day of fasting, standing, and many uncomfortable restrictions. Are the Temple's "ancient" sacrifices just that – archaic, inapplicable, and even brutal acts, deserving our abandonment? Must our religiosity comply with our subjective feelings, or must "we" comply with these practices and ideas, regardless of our opinion of their inapplicability?

As Torah Jews who respect that all in our Torah is God's word, applicable for all time[1], we take a different road: we seek to discover the eternal truths contained in each of our precious Mitzvahs and ideals, instead of projecting our wishes on them. As Torah Jews, we know all that God commanded does not expire, as man's nature does not expire. As Adam was created, and as the Jews existed at Sinai when they received these commands, so are we today: possessing those identical faculties and desires. As such, we are no less in need of the Torah's sacrifices and their lessons. The sacrifices address our human nature today, and it is only due to our sins, that the Temple is non-existent, and our levels are degraded by its absence. But we may still perfect ourselves to a great degree by understanding the underlying ideas of the Yom Kippur sacrifices; we must study the characteristics and requirements of the sacrifices. We must review the Torah, Talmud, and our sages, such as Maimonides, Ramban, Rashi and Ibn Ezra.

Two Goats

I will address just two of the Yom Kippur sacrifices: the two goats upon which a lottery was cast. Two goats – preferably with similar visual features, height, and cost – were presented in the Temple. The priest would blindly draw a lot, which contained both God's name and that of Azazel. Each goat was designated for the

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lot placed on it. The scapegoat – the one sent to its death off Mount Azazel – is described as “carrying all the sins of the Jews”[2]. This goat atoned for all sins, provided one repented. The other goat dedicated as a sin offering in the Temple atoned only for the sins of the Jews in their defiled entry to the Temple sanctuary.

What is the reason for the goat’s similarity? Why was their designation for either a sin offering in the Temple, or Mount Azazel, decided by a lottery? Why do we require two goats: cannot a single goat atone for all sins? What was significant about Mount Azazel? And why was there a service of clouding the Holy of Holies where the Ark resided, included in the process of sacrificing these two goats?

Furthermore, we are struck by the Torah’s placement of the Yom Kippur sacrifices in Parshas Achrei Mos[3] immediately subsequent to the death of Aaron’s two sons who offered a “strange fire”: an offering not commanded by God. What was the gravity of their sin, that God killed them? And what is the connection between Aaron’s sons’ sin and the Yom Kippur sacrifices, that the Torah joins the two in one section? We also wonder what God means by His critique of Aaron’s two sons, “And you shall not come at all times to the Holy of Holies behind the Parochess [curtain] before the Kaporets[4] which is on the Ark, so none shall die...for in cloud do I [God] appear on the Kaporets”.[5] What is the stress of “for in cloud do I appear on the Kaporets”? What is the significance again of “cloud”? And finally, why, after concluding the section on Yom Kippur sacrifices, does the Torah continue with the restriction of sacrificing outside the Temple, with the punishment of one’s soul being cut off? In that section[6] God warns the Jews about sacrificing to demons [imaginary beings] and also warns about eating blood, which also meets with the loss of one’s soul. Maimonides teaches that the practice of eating blood was imagined by those sinners to provide them comradeship with assumed spirits, and that those sinners would benefit by such a union. Although the questions are many, I believe one idea will answer them all.

The Scapegoat

What is the significance of Yom Kippur? It is the day when we are forgiven. What does “forgiveness” imply? It implies that we sin. And in what does man sin? This is where I believe we can answer all our questions.

We readily answer that we sin by deviating from God’s commands. The worst sin, of course, is idolatry, where we assume the greatest error: other powers exist, besides God. If one assumes this fatal error, his concept of God is false, and his soul cannot enjoy the afterlife, which is a greater connection with the one, true God. This explains why those sinners who sacrificed to imaginary beings – demons – and

those who eat blood, lose their eternal life. And even if these exact practices are not performed, but one harbors the thought that there exists powers other than God, be they powers assumed to exist in physical objects, or even in the Torah’s words...such individuals also cross that line of idolatry.

The Scapegoat – the one goat sent to its death off Mount Azazel – was to atone for all our sins. Sin emanates from a disregard of God and His word, but in its most grave form, idolatry. The Rabbis say that the Scapegoat is not sacrificed, but hurled from a peak downwards, to prevent us from assuming it is a ‘sacrifice’ to those demons, normally associated with the wilderness where Mount Azazel is located. By destroying the Scapegoat and not sacrificing it, we actively deny any claim of those desert-based demons, or truths about comradeship with spirits by eating blood from sacrifices to demons. We wish to deny any and all claims of assumed powers, other than God. Our atonement is effectuated through the Scapegoat, by admitting the fallacy of idolatry, and the rejection of any intelligent existence besides God, His angels, or man. Nothing else exists that is self-aware; nothing else besides God, His angels, and man, possess any intelligence, or capabilities other than natural laws. The Scapegoat thereby undermines and utterly rejects man’s path where he deviates from Torah practice. But there is another area of sin.

The Other Sin

“And they brought before God a strange fire, which He had not commanded them[7]”. Aaron’s sons Nadav and Avihu expressed the other area of sin: man-made, religious practice. Although we assume sin to be solely identified as deviation from the Torah as seen in idolatry, sin also exists when we attempt to approach God, but with our own devices, as the verse states, “And they brought before God a strange fire...”. “Before God” is the operative phrase. Nadav and Avihu intended to approach God, not in accord with His ways, but with their own. The Rabbis stated, “The Jews desired to contain the Evil Instinct. It exited as a fiery lion from the Holy of Holies. They attempted to retrain the lion by seizing its mane, but it let out a loud roar.” Regarding this Talmudic metaphor, a Rabbi once asked what was most significant. He answered, “the fact that the instincts were exiting the Temple’s Holy of Holies”. What does this mean? It means that man’s instincts are most powerful – like a fiery lion – in connection with the most religious of activities and locations: the Holy of Holies. We need not look far to realize this truth, as demonstrated in Jihads and other holy wars. Religion is a great target for man’s instincts, as in this area he is greatly motivated. In unguided religious expression, man’s emotions will take over, as seen in Aaron’s two sons who wished religious expression of their own creation. The existence of so many

divergent man-made religions proves this point that man wishes subjective religious expression.

It is this sin, I believe, that the second Yom Kippur goat addresses. This second, goat sin offering was brought in the Temple, and not sent to the wilderness as the other, for it is this goat that addresses man’s sin in the Temple. Man requires recognizing his sin in both deviating from God, and in approaching God. God too addresses these two deviances with His commands not to add to, or subtract from the Torah. Subtracting from the Torah parallels the Scapegoat, where man abandons Torah and God in place of demons; and adding to the Torah parallels the sin of Nadav and Avihu who expressed an addition to the Torah’s prescribed commands, corrected by this second goat brought in the Temple to atone for the Jews’ sins in Temple.

God’s Arrangement of Torah Sections

We can now readily understand why God placed the Yom Kippur sacrifices in His Torah, between the sin of Nadav and Avihu and the prohibition to sacrifice to demons. It is because Yom Kippur sacrifice intends to address man’s two areas of sin: the over religious sin seen in Nadav and Avihu, and the lack of religiosity seen in demon sacrifice, where one does not approach God, but runs from Him towards imagined imposters. Yom Kippur atones for us by directing our attention to the two areas of human sin: non-religious, and over religious. We are alerted to apply this lesson to our own deviances. The non-religious person assumes more knowledge than God, as he feels he understands better how the world operates. He therefore creates his own demons, and worships them. He is lacking an understanding of the One Creator, as he assumes multiple forces. The over religious person feels otherwise: he feels safe, as he “approaches God” as did Aaron’s sons. He feels with his intent to serve God, anything goes. He feels he can create new modes of religious practice, and that he will find favor in God’s eyes. But the Torah’s response for both is death of some kind. Thus, “any” deviation – even when our intent is to serve God – is construed by God as sin.

Perhaps the need for two goats is derived from our two areas of deviance. And perhaps, as one goat addresses the abandoning of God in idolatry, that same goat is unfit to address our faulted approach to God: idolatry is a far greater crime: idolatry errs about God Himself, while over religiosity errs about His will. But both goats are preferably identical, to teach that either goat satisfies one or the other requirement, since there is nothing in the goat per se that atones, but it is our understanding and conviction in their respective ‘lessons’, that truly atones for us. The lottery also contributes to removing any significance to either goat, as each was picked by “chance”.

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Yom Kippur

Cloud

Why was there a service of “clouding” the Holy of Holies where the Ark resided, included in the service of Yom Kippur? And why was God’s response to Nadav and Avihu, “for in cloud do I [God] appear on the Kaporets”? Cloud was also present at God’s Revelation at Sinai. What is the commonality?

Nadav and Avihu violated the principle that God is unknowable, by assuming they knew how to approach God. Thus, God responds that He appears in cloud. What is cloud? It represents man’s blindness. Man is blind about God’s nature, and also about how to approach Him, without Torah. Nadav and Avihu’s sin was in their denial of their ignorance concerning God. God therefore reiterated to Moses and Aaron the concept of man’s blind ignorance, by describing how He appears in cloud. And again in our yearly Yom Kippur service, we must reiterate our agreement with our ignorant natures, by clouding the holiest of all places, the Holy of Holies. Our religious practice must contain a service that demonstrates our ignorance. Our atonement relies on a rejection of our instinctual, religious fabrication.

Application for Today

It is vital that in our approach to God, that we be so careful not to add to Torah commands, regardless of the popularity of new practices, even among religious Jews. Our barometer for what is God’s intent, is God’s word alone. We must not fall prey to our need for human approval, that we blindly accept what the masses of religious Jews perpetrate as Torah. If we are truly careful, and seek out authentic, authoritative Torah sources, we will discover what is true Torah, and what violates God’s words.

In a conversation with a dear friend recently, I was asked what I felt about certain Kabbalistic views. They included these: that cut fingernails are dangerous; that people might hurt us with evil eyes; that reciting the letters of God’s name offers man power; and other nonsensical positions. My first response was that there is doubt as to the authenticity of the Zohar, and further, Zohar is not the Torah given by God at Sinai. But regardless, I told this friend that if an idea makes no sense, it matters none if a Rabbi wrote it, for even Moses, the most perfected intellect erred. Therefore, no man alive today is infallible. So quoting the Zohar is meaningless, if the idea violates Torah and reason.

God gave each of us a Tzelem Elokim – intelligence – that we must engage, and not ignore. Regardless of the prevalence of practices in religious Jewish communities, we have intelligence with which we may discern what makes sense, and what is nonsense. It matters none if the practice is a sacrifice to demons, or a practice that includes a Torah object like a mezuzah, a challah, or if one cites an accepted book authored by a Rabbi. We have the Torah’s

authentic principles to guide us towards reasonable practices. Just as demons and their assumed powers are imagined, so are the powers assume to exist in challas, red bendels, mezuzas, or reciting Torah verses with the intent to heal the sick.

Religious deviance seeks substantiation by including Torah articles in man made practice, and as we learn from Nadav and Avihu, any deviation from God’s commands – even to approach Him – is a sin. If you are in doubt to the validity of a practice, study the Torah, read the Shulchan Aruch, or ask a Rabbi to show you a source. But if you find no source for a given practice, do not follow it. And many times with your mind alone, you can uncover the falsehood in popular claims.

This Yom Kippur, break free from what is popular, comfortable, or falsely promises success and health. “Teshuva, Tefila and Tzedaka”, repentance, prayer and charity, are what God deems as our correct response:

Do Teshuva from false notions and actions, regardless of their popularity, for you exist to follow God, not to impress your neighbor by copying their errors.

Pray to God to direct you to new truths, to forgive and purify you, and to help you abandon fallacy. And if your Hebrew reading is not excellent, pray in English or your own language, for prayer is meaningless if you do not understand what you recite.

And give charity to recognize your own insignificance, to break loose of our attachment to wealth, and recognize that God alone grants wealth. Assist others, recognizing them as God’s creation, and show them pity, as you wish God to show you.

Use God laws alone to secure your good life, and do not continue in the sins of abandoning God, or attempting to serve Him in way He did not command. The Scapegoat teaches that our imagination is destructive, and the goat sin offering curbs our over religious tendencies. We must learn where these lessons may apply to each one of us, for we all have false notions in connection with purely instinctual needs, and religious needs. Be guided by reason, by God’s precisely worded Torah. And may we all forgive, be forgiven, and enjoy a new year of life, health, wealth and happiness that can only come from careful Torah adherence. ■

[1] See Maimonides’ 13 Principles

[2] Lev. 16:22

[3] Lev. 16:1-34

[4] The Kaporets was the Ark’s lid formed of solid gold, with the figurines of two cherubim – childlike creatures with wings.

[5] Lev. 16:2

[6] Lev. 17:1-16

[7] Lev. 10:1

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Yom Kippur

Today, two days before Yom Kippur 5765, Rabbi Chait gave a class on the Yom Kippur Temple service. Rabbi Chait commenced his class, distinguishing between the central focuses of Rosh Hashannah and Yom Kippur.

Rosh Hashannah focuses on G-d's Kingship. This means we are to recognize and accept upon ourselves G-d's absolute rule as expressed through His creation (omnipotence). G-d's role as Creator reserves for Him the exclusive cause for all that exists. This translates to absolute Kingship over all. Rosh Hashannah also focuses on His absolute Knowledge (omniscience). G-d alone knows all, and thereby He alone inscribes us for good or evil for this coming year. G-d's omnipotence and omniscience expressed together on Rosh Hashannah teach that G-d reigns over all, and is knowledgeable of all. Nothing is beyond His abilities, or His knowledge. There is no other cause for the universe and all that fills it.

In contrast, Yom Kippur's distinction is "G-d's ineffable name": the priests would recite G-d's ineffable name ten times in the Temple during Yom Kippur. Being prohibited to enunciate G-d's name normally, is to serve as our demonstration that we lack any knowledge of G-d, i.e., we cannot even mention His name, which would suggest we possess some idea about Him. Any description of G-d – even the meaning of His name – is unknown to us. But on Yom Kippur, this actual name of G-d is mentioned ten times. This indicates that on Yom Kippur, there is a closer relationship to G-d. What is this relationship?

Rabbi Chait stated that the very recognition of our ignorance about G-d's nature atones for our sins. How so? The answer is that through our recognition that we have no concept of G-d, this acknowledgement entitles us existence for another year. We thereby learn that our existence depends on obtaining correct ideas, and our admission of ignorance regarding anything related to G-d. We cannot know G-d, as the Torah says, "...for man cannot know M while he is alive." So when we admit of this ignorance, we are in fact stating a truth, and when man is in line with truth, G-d's providence relates to him even more. The more knowledge we attain of truths, and the more we realize we are ignorant of G-d, that is how much more our lives are a reality before G-d and "worth" existence. In other words, as we continually grow in our realization that G-d is not physical, that He possesses no emotions, nor any quality existent in the universe, although we attain no positive knowl-

edge of G-d, we are in fact removing false notions about Him. This act of negating, positions us more in line with truth. Let us now examine the ideas obtained through the Yom Kippur service

After the normal daily service, the High Priest would slaughter the ox, one of many sacrifices on Yom Kippur. But before enacting the central service of this sacrifice – sprinkling of the blood on the Ark's cover – the High Priests is commanded to interrupt this ox service, and offer the incense in the Temple's Holy of Holies. Why this interruption? Additionally, the priest must wait until this room is entirely filled with the smoke of the burning incense. What is the meaning behind this waiting period?

The purpose is that the smoke is to create an opaque veil between the High Priest and the rest of the room of the Holy of Holies. This veil is an admission of the "veil" that exists between G-d and man. Maimonides states that Revelation at Sinai too was traditionally explained to have been a rainy day, also a veil of sorts. The cloud and thick cloud at Sinai certainly teaches this lesson, that there is an infinite distance between G-d and man. Even when G-d "reveals" Himself by creating the miracles of Sinai – a closer relationship – nonetheless, only a distant relationship exists between G-d, who is far exalted from anything we can fathom, as mortal, created man.

So the High Priest must acknowledge that man is far removed from G-d, and only through this realization, is the High Priest permitted to then complete his offering. There is a danger that man may think he possesses some idea about G-d. Not only is this false, but until the High Priest admits of his ignorance through the incense's veil, he is prohibited to continue with his worship, lest he assume he is serving his own fantasy idea of G-d, and not the true G-d. For if we wrongly assume that we do in fact possess some truths about G-d, Temple worship would then be converted to heresy and idolatry. This explains the interruption of the ox sacrifice.

In another class given by Rabbi Chait many years ago, he cited the Talmud that described the most powerful human instincts as a "fiery lion exiting the Holy of Holies in the Temple". Rabbi Chait explained then, that this teaches us that the most powerful instinct is the "religious emotion". It is in Temple that man is subject to forming ideas about to whom he is serving. Therefore, the Talmud states that the "fiery lion" (a powerful and dangerous entity referring to the

(continued on next page)



Yom Kippur's Temple Service

Rabbi Israel Chait

Written and elaborated by student

Yom Kippur

*Rabbi Chait mentioned
that there is no escape
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emotional drives.
This is our nature.
Other religions wish to
deny this aspect of man,
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of our greatest prophets.*

religious emotion) had exited. It is within service to G-d that man must be on his highest level of guard. For it is here that man religious emotions are heightened.

The next sacrifice is the goat of the people. So far there are two sacrifices: the High Priest's ox, and the peoples' goat. Why must there be two separate offerings for our sins? We derive a new insight: the priests require their own atonement. What additional atonement do they require? Why can't they join in the nation's goat sin sacrifice? The answer can only lie in the priest's distinction: Temple service. Meaning, even those who serve in the Temple by G-d's very command – the priests – are not immune to the instincts, which never cease to cause us to sin. As such, the priests must demonstrate that Temple service is not something that they can perform flawlessly. Therefore, they alone must be atoned through a separate animal. Had they joined the people with the nation's goat, this lesson would not be learned.

Rabbi Chait mentioned that there is no escape from the control of our unconscious and our emotional drives. This is our nature. Other religions wish to deny this aspect of man, but Judaism does not have heroes or saints, all man's sins are revealed in the Torah, even those of our greatest prophets. Judaism embraces the acceptance of reality, and foremost, this includes that we are instinctual by nature, that we have an unconscious, and that we possess emotional attractions for matters that the Torah prohibits.

We learn that Temple itself requires atonement, that is, we demonstrate through the priest's offering that Temple service is not an area in which man escapes sin – how profound an idea. In other words, we are not worthy of Temple. We make the Temple impure by not guarding ourselves from Torah defined impurities. And when we are in an impure state (contact with the dead for example) and we enter the Temple without purification, we defile the Temple, its vessels and its sacrifices. These sins all require atonement. We cannot properly relate to the requirements of Temple, so in Temple law itself, are the commands to offer atonements for Temple impurities that we commit.

I added that the Rabbis state, “the Day of Yom Kippur ‘itself’ is an atonement.” What is meant by “itself”? I suggested that this means the following: Yom Kippur's existence as a fixed

part of the calendar teaches our unavoidable need to be forgiven. We cannot escape sin, and we learn this as well from there being an eternally fixed day of Yom Kippur, even in the Messianic era. Although we will rise to a higher level of existence during this era, man's nature will still include instincts. Thus, our recognition that Yom Kippur is essential for our forgiveness impresses us with the idea that man is inherently flawed. Such an idea carves into man's heart his acceptance of his nature. This acceptance alone atones. How so? As we said, recognition of our nature raises us to be more in line with reality, and additionally, as we accept this reality, we may be moved to reflect on our flaws.

Rabbi Chait also taught that even on the Day of Atonement itself, Yom Kippur, there are infractions committed by the priests and man who cannot control all of their thoughts. Ironically, as we are being atoned for our sins of the year, we continue to have sinful thoughts crossing our minds, and these must be atoned for as well! This is why there are two additional sin offerings later on, in the day of Yom Kippur. To me, this is such a prime example of the honesty of Torah, that it is a system which embraces truth at every turn, and never considers there to be any area or service in which man is bereft of his instinctual nature, and thus, sin.

Now, although we stated that the priests must atone for their own Temple service infractions through a distinct sacrifice, yet, we are one people. Rabbi Chait stated that this is demonstrated by the command of the mixing of the blood of both offerings. The priest's animal blood and that of the animal of the nation are intermingled as one.

Returning to the idea that man cannot escape his instinctual drives, no matter how far he progresses in his perfection, Rabbi Chait mentioned the Scapegoat, the Sa-ir Ha-Azazel. The priest confesses the sins of all the Jews, and the Torah euphemistically states that the animal “carries off” our sins to the desert, where this Scapegoat is delivered to its certain death as it is dismembered upon its fall onto Mount Azazel's rocky slopes. Through this service, we attain recognition that the unconscious emotions in man will lead him too to a most certain, spiritual death.

This service is elaborated upon in the article entitled “Saer L'azazel-The Scapegoat”. ■

Yom Kippur

The Evolution of Yom Kippur

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Yom Kippur usually carries a dread – not “only” of a potentially fatal judgment – but the more commonly dreaded 25-hour period where we suffer from prohibitions against simple comforts: we cannot eat or bathe, and we stand many hours in prayer without shoes. These laws create an unfortunate and incorrect, negative association, to a day, which should be most celebrated: we are forgiven! Sadly, many of us focus on the lack of food, more than on how God will pronounce His justice over our life, health, success, and happiness. Our attachment to this Earthly existence is to blame for granting more value to immediate needs, than for our souls. Tell a person sentenced to death that 25 hours of fasting and prayer will give him another year of life, and he will kiss you. We should feel the same way. If we can accept this brief period of fasting and discomfort, and get past the anxiety, we can discover some interesting ideas, which God has covertly conveyed to us in His Torah about this day. And with these new realizations, I feel we will welcome this day with an appreciation for God’s intent, and minimal concern over the discomforts...that do have their place.

The Origin of Yom Kippur

Where did Yom Kippur come from: is it a day God planned from the outset during Creation, or something that evolved, responding to man’s flaws?

All of creation typifies one of these two possibilities; for there is no other. Either something was part of God’s original plan, or it was added later. For example, man was first created quite tall, with a lifespan of 1000 years. The Medrash says that man used to traverse the Earth in a few steps, uprooting cedars, and fierce beasts such as lions were as fleas to him: an exaggerated truism. But after man’s ego directed him to sin (primarily due to these gifts of stature and longevity), God reduced his stature and minimized his years to address the very cause of his sin. Thus, man had an original design, that was later changed due to his sinful nature. Due to his sin, man was then to share the same food as his donkey, but God rescinded this decree and allowed him to have

some ego satisfaction, in the act of working the ground for his food. Again, there was an original plan regarding man’s food, and then a concession to man’s nature.

However, in the Garden of Eden, there was not yet a Yom Kippur, only a Rosh Hashanah. This means that a day of judgment and a final verdict occurred simultaneously. But today, we experience a day of judgment (Rosh Hashanah) and a separate Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur). Why was there a change? The Ran says as does Maimonides, “The wholly righteous [even now] are written and sealed for life immediately on Rosh Hashanah.” They need no Yom Kippur. This makes sense, as a righteous person is always reviewing his thoughts and actions. He probably does not even need a Rosh Hashanah. The Ran continues, “But average people like us (baynoni) are granted a stay of execution for 10 more days, so we might investigate our deeds and repent”. We now understand that Adam did not require the 10-day reflection period. As Ibn Ezra teaches, “Adam was a great intellect”. But as man slid in his perfection, the 10 Days of Repentance and Yom Kippur became a need.

The Ran states (Ran on Rosh Hashanah; 3a, “BiRosh”): “God desires to grant merit in the Jews’ judgment, and He desires to judge His creations in a time established for atonement and forgiveness”. Here, Ran refers to the fact that Moses obtained atonement for the Jews’ sin of the Gold Calf on this 10th of Tishrei, on Yom Kippur. Therefore, God judges us on the day in which He forgave Israel back then. But we wonder what this means, that God “desired to judge us in a time established for forgiveness”. It was God who initially forgave man! So what is meant by God forgiving “when” He forgave? Whenever He wants to forgive, will also be a day when “He forgave”! In essence, our question is, “Why does God wish to copy Himself?” Sounds strange? But as always, the Rabbis are teaching profound insights.

My understanding of this phenomenon of God copying Himself means this: God’s forgiveness is based on “Himself”, i.e., His forgiveness is not based on “our claims”, for we have no claim against God. “Copying Himself” (His forgiveness of the Gold Calf sin, and then following through for all Yom Kippurs) means that it is God’s mercy alone that demands man to be forgiven. Without God’s mercy, when man sins, he breaks his Torah treaty with God. And as is the case with all agreements, one who breaks his agreement must pay. But in connection with God, we have the good fortune of an additional aspect of “God’s mercy”, as we recited all week in Selichos, “For on Your abundant mercy do we trust” for forgiveness. Therefore, man has no rights once he sins, but God is merciful, and “this” is why we are forgiven. This is what the Ran means by God using His initial day of forgiveness, as a model for future

forgiveness: His forgiveness is based on His nature.

Now let us turn our attention to the sin of the Gold Calf to better grasp its significance as the forerunner of Yom Kippur.

The Gold Calf & Yom Kippur

We now understand why God repeats His forgiveness, for this is His merciful nature, and His nature never changes. Therefore, man will always be forgiven...if he seeks God’s mercy. Additionally, later generations who did not sin with the Gold Calf also require a Yom Kippur since we all share the same design as humans who sin.

Why was Moses’ intercession necessary to obtain forgiveness for the people? Perhaps it was Moses’ potential to educate the Jews back to a proper lifestyle that earned the Jews forgiveness. It was also Moses who had the greatest level of wisdom, enabling him to learn from God how to obtain pardon. But this area requires more study. What I wish to focus on in this section is the sin of the Gold Calf. How was this event so significant for all time? Furthermore, Rashi states (Exod. 32:34): “*When God punishes the Jews in the future for other sins, He will also require some punishment for the Gold Calf. For no punishment comes upon Israel, that doesn’t contain some of the punishment for the Gold Calf*”. But why should the Gold Calf sin be required, when the Jews sin in other matters? What was this sin?

The Jews miscounted the day of Moses’ descent from Sinai. They said to Aaron after seeing Moses delayed, “Rise, make for as elohim (governor) that shall go before us. For this Moses, ‘the man’ who took us out of Egypt, we know not what has become of him”. The “man”? That’s an odd statement.

The Jews thought Moses might have died. They created the Gold Calf – not as a representation of God – but of the “powers” they witnessed. (Ramban) The Jews displayed the inability to detach from the “man” Moses. So deep was this need for physical, religious life, that they created a gold, physical expression. And so deep was this need, that God allowed a concession for it. Sforno teaches that God only commanded Moses and the Jews in the Temple and in all its vessels, so the Jews might have the expression they sought: a physical means of religious expression. Without the sin of the Gold Calf, Temple would not be part of the Torah, and human life. Of course the allowed human expression in Temple service is highly regulated to insure no idolatrous venting.

Therefore, the Gold Calf sin, in essence, is the inability for man to approach God abstractly. In other words, all of man’s approaches to God are severely compromised due to our feeble natures, and our over attachment to the physical. Thus, when we sin in the future, we are in fact expressing this same flaw,

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which that ancient generation expressed in building the Calf. Sin means that we cannot live 100% in line with God, we must deviate from Him. So the statement in Rashi that "all sins receive some punishment of the Gold Calf", means that all sins share the same crime, at their every root, as the Gold Calf. A wise Rabbi recently mentioned that the first Tablets were created during the Six Days of Creation. (Avos, 5:6) The idea, if I recall well, is similar to what we are saying: God initially desired the Jews to possess the first Tablets, i.e., He desired we live a more abstract and thus, more perfected existence, realizing Him from creation, indicated by those first stones being part of Creation. But after the Gold Calf sin, we received Moses' hewn tablets.

Rashi on Exodus 33:11 says that God forgave the Jews for the Golden Calf with a full heart and with gladness, and this occurred on the tenth of Tishrei, Yom Kippur. The sin of the Gold Calf epitomized mankind's central, religious flaw. But this is not all that occurs on Yom Kippur. We have so many unique services. From where or what are they derived?

Fatal, Ultra-Religious Emotions

The Torah outlines the Yom Kippur sacrifices and highly unique services at the very beginning of Parshas Acharay Mos. Sin offerings and Olah offerings are brought; the priests and Jews bring separate offerings; the High Priest clouded the Holy of Holies in the Temple with an incense; and the Scapegoat is hurled off a rocky peak from Azazel. Together, these acts form amazingly unparalleled and curious acts of worship, to say the least. But we also read that these services come on the heels of the death of Aaron's two sons. What is the connection? Let's first understand their sin for which God killed them, and then, why their story must be the intro to the Yom Kippur worship. At this point, the Gold Calf, Aaron's sons' deaths, these strange forms of worship, and the afflictions...all seem quite disjointed.

Acharay Mos commences as follows (Lev. 16:1,2):

"And God spoke to Moses after the death of the two sons of Aaron, when they drew close before God, and they were killed. And God said to Moses, 'Speak unto Aaron your brother, that he does not draw close at all time towards the Holy of Holies, behind the Paroches [curtain] facing the Cherubim that is on the Ark, that he not be killed. For in cloud do I appear on the Cherubim'."

The Torah then describes all of the Yom Kippur sacrifices and services. When we read of the sin of Aaron's sons Nadav and Avihu (Lev. 10:1) the Torah says that they brought a "strange" fire that they "were

not commanded" to bring. In other words, they sought to serve God with their own type of worship. God teaches us their sin above with the words "when they drew close to God". God is teaching us that our approach to Him must be exactly as He outlines in His Torah. Nadav and Avihu did seek to "draw close to God", but they allowed their instincts to run free in the religious sphere. They imagined they could worship God with unguided actions...actions God never prescribed. But this is impossible, and a fatal error. The correct formula is this: our approach to God cannot be by any means that God disagrees with. "Do not add to the Torah" is a command addressing this very ultra-religious emotion, and teaches exactly what God denounces: "all that is omitted from Torah is prohibited". The Talmud teaches that the religious sphere is where man's instincts are greatest. We see this today with jihads and Temple mount claims. And the Talmud metaphorically depicted the instincts as a fiery lion exiting the Holy of Holies. This teaches our very point, as a wise Rabbi taught, "the instincts are strongest in religious matters"...the Holy of Holies is where human instincts are as powerful (fiery) as a lion.

But why observe all of these services, on Yom Kippur? How do Nadav and Avihu tie into this Day of Atonement? It would appear, that as Temple is a response to the Gold Calf sin, and Nadav and Avihu erred in Temple worship, the tie is apparent. The very vehicle God compromised on – Temple – contains dangers, and explains why it was not a preferred institution! Even our very approach to God in Temple will be flawed, since man is flawed.

Therefore, the sacrifices on Yom Kippur actually come to atone for "sinful worship", as ironic as it sounds. Rashi teaches that the Yom Kippur sacrifices atone for the Jews and the Priests' errors in worship. Of course the Scapegoat atones for other sins, but a primary focus is on atonement for flawed, Temple worship. This explains why the Yom Kippur services outlined in the Torah come on the heels of Aaron's sons' sin. Just as they erred in approaching God in Temple, we do as well. In our very approach to God, our instincts do not let up. Amazing. How honest is our Torah! But again, be mindful that Temple is a 'concession', explaining why flawed worship is no surprise.

My friend Jeremy Koppel suggested this following idea many years ago: the reason there are sin offerings and Olah offerings, is to teach that atonement (sin offering) is not the final objective, but approaching God without the need to repent is: love of God is greater than fear of God. Another two ideas tie in now.

Why does the High Priest cloud the Holy of Holies? He does so as God says, *"For in cloud do I*

appear on the Cherubim". This quote was God's response to Aaron's sons' sin. This means that God is imperceptible via human senses. In all of God's revelations and communications, cloud is present: cloud hovered over the Temple; at Revelation at Sinai there were clouds and fog; and the Temple has the incense altar that creates cloud. Why do we need cloud? This is to teach that a "veil" exists between God and mankind. "For man cannot know Me while alive" was said by God to Moses. And it was this truth that Aaron's two sons did not grasp, and assumed they could imagine how to approach God. However, not only is God unknowable, but also, so is man's approach to Him, unless we are taught how.

We also learn in Acharay Mos that the priests offer separate sacrifices from the Jews. This can be explained as a result of the priests' role. They worship in the temple daily, and have a greater danger of falling prey to religious emotions. Therefore, their atonement for Temple infractions is of a greater nature than the Jews', explaining why their animal sacrifice is a greater animal, a bull, while the Jews' sin offering is a goat.

Summary

We learn that Yom Kippur is God's merciful response to man's flaws, and that this day evolved due to the Jews' sin of the Gold Calf, and to Aaron's son's flawed worship. The Gold Calf sin demanded a day be devoted to addressing man's Earthbound, sinful nature; our inability to live 100% without sin. But the sacrifices brought on Yom Kippur were not based on this Gold Calf event. They were a response to Nadav and Avihu's sin. Yet, these sins are a direct result of Temple, which itself is a result of the Gold Calf. Due to our need to employ physical expression in our worship of God, God conceded with a Temple. And due to this concession, man inevitably sinned in his expression, embodied in Nadav and Avihu's sin.

Reflecting on these ideas, we come to realize our natures as humans: creations that are imperfect; creatures with dependent existences, and who rely on the Creator for our lives. But during our brief existence, we are so fortunate that God extends to man this Day of Atonement; where He wipes our slate clean. He encourages our renewed existence in the pursuit of learning more about Him and living properly. He gave us His Torah for us, not for Him, as God has no needs.

So as we enter and exit this holy day, we must feel fortunate, not hungry or tired. We should truly search out from our Torah leaders what God truly wants of us, for our own good.

Yom Kippur equips us with a fresh beginning; and abandonment of old sinful ways, as a new "me" emerges revitalized with vigor. May we harness this new strength to grow ever stronger in our Torah lifestyles, remaining firm to what God teaches, without deviation. ■



May Hashem grant a speedy recovery to
Rivkah bas Mazel Tov

*Your merits will stand by you
and grant you many happy and healthy
New Years!*

—Moshe ben Rivkah