

# The CHASSIDUS PERSPECTIVE with Reb Yoel Kahn



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## THE ESSENCE OF YOM KIPPUR

The Gemara states that the verse “Seek Hashem when He is close” refers to the “ten days *between* Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.” This terminology raises an obvious question: There are only seven days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, not ten!

The answer is that Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur each have a unique aspect, separate from what they share in common with the rest of the Aseres Yemei Teshuvah. We thus begin with the unique aspect of Rosh Hashanah, continue with the ten days of repentance (including Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur as they are part of the Aseres Yemei Teshuvah), and then conclude with the unique aspect of Yom Kippur. This is the meaning of the Gemara’s wording, “ten days *between* Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur”: there are ten days of repentance that lie between the unique aspects of Rosh Hashanah (before them) and Yom Kippur (after them).

Rosh Hashanah’s unique quality lies in crowning Hashem as our king. What is Yom Kippur’s special aspect? The fact that “the day itself atones.”

### A DAY THAT ATONES

The Gemara cites a difference of opinion between Rabbi and the rest of the Sages. Rabbi holds that the day of Yom Kippur itself atones, while the Sages are of the opinion that atonement is only achieved through repentance. The *halachah* is that Yom Kippur only atones for those who repent. Yet, the language of the Rambam (and the Alter Rebbe in Shulchan Aruch) is that “the day itself atones for those who repent.”

This indicates that even according to the Sages, the actual atonement is wrought by Yom Kippur itself. Although *teshuvah* is necessary, it is not what accomplishes atonement; rather, it is merely a condition that allows the atonement of Yom Kippur to take effect.

If not for this wording of the Rambam, we might have understood that the atonement of Yom Kippur is achieved through repentance. Although *teshuvah* is effective throughout the year, we would have explained that the *teshuvah* of Yom Kippur is of greater quality. (This would be similar to the Aseres Yemei Teshuvah, during which time *teshuvah* is more potent than the rest of the year.) However, the Rambam states explicitly that the “day *itself* atones (for those who repent)”; the atonement of Yom Kippur is not accomplished through *teshuvah*, but through the merit of the day itself.

### AUTOMATIC CLEANSING?

This requires explanation. How can the mere day of Yom Kippur erase a person’s *aveiros*?

Were the atonement of Yom Kippur to consist simply of the waiving

of *punishment*, where Hashem states that although one sinned and deserves a penalty, He decides to forgo the sentence—we could understand. However, this is not what “atonement” means. The Hebrew word for atonement is *kaparah*, which also translates as “wiping away”; atonement means that Hashem wipes away the grime and *kelipah* produced by *aveiros*. How can this *kelipah* simply be removed, just like that?

The fact that actual *teshuvah* erases the *kelipah* can be understood. *Sefarim* explain that each *kelipah* consists of a “body” and “soul”; the body is created from the act of the sin, while the soul is derived from the pleasure taken in sinning. The regret of *teshuvah* undoes the soul of the *kelipah*, while the *vidui*, the verbal

expression of regret and resolve, destroys the *kelipah*’s body (as “moving the lips is tantamount to action”). But how is it possible for Yom Kippur itself to have the same effect?

(This is especially difficult according to Rabbi, who holds that there is no requirement for *teshuvah*. However, even according to the Sages that *teshuvah* is necessary, that is not what accomplishes atonement; rather, it is the day itself that atones, as explained above. How does that work?)

### SPONTANEOUS RETURN

Interestingly, the Minchas Chinuch argues that there is no *mitzvah* to do *teshuvah*. The *mitzvah* is that one who does decide to do *teshuvah* should express their regret verbally (*vidui*). He likens this to the fact that there is no *mitzvah* to divorce; the *mitzvah* is that if one does decide to divorce, it should be done via a *get*.

Now, the Alter Rebbe writes in Tanya that *teshuvah* is in fact a *mitzvah*, a view that has support from the Rambam. However, the Minchas Chinuch’s view certainly has credence too. But this opinion seems strange. Apparently, the Torah is saying: “If you want, you can remain a *rasha*; I am not instructing you to repent. The only thing I am commanding you is that if you do decide to do *teshuvah*, you must say *vidui*!”

The Rebbe explains that if anything, it is the Alter Rebbe’s position that needs to be understood, not the Minchas Chinuch.

Deep down, a Jew always wants to fulfill Hashem’s Will. When our actions conflict with Hashem’s Will, this bothers us deeply, although these feelings sometimes remain hidden. When our sentiments of regret surface, we are ashamed of our actions and do *teshuvah*.

To do *teshuvah* because we were commanded to do so would be an oxymoron! *Teshuvah* by definition is a spontaneous outburst of an overwhelming sense of dissatisfaction. Attempting to regulate it would be similar to the *machzorim* that give instructions when to break out in

tears: "At this point, cry for ten minutes!"

For this reason, the Minchas Chinuch learns that doing *teshuvah* is not a *mitzvah*. Indeed, while other *mitzvos* are subject to numerous laws and details, it's impossible to present that many laws with regard to *teshuvah*, because *teshuvah* is about a person's personal feelings of regret.

## AN ONLY SON

At the same time, however, to some degree it is possible to assess the depths of someone's regret, or the extent of one's positive resolve. However, there is another aspect that is truly immeasurable: the very core of a Jew.

Take, for example, the description of a Jew being Hashem's "only son." The connection of a son to his father is not defined by the fact that if he disobeys his father's wishes, he will ultimately mend his ways. Of course, this is indeed true, but the essence of their connection is much deeper. Their connection lies in the fact that a son is one entity with his father. As a *result* of this, anything that conflicts his father's wishes disturbs him (and if it does not, that's only the way it is externally, but deep down he is bothered by it). However, these feelings of shame are not what *defines* their relationship; they are merely a *byproduct* of it.

The discussion here is not about the father's commands and desires, the son's obeying them, and his regret when failing to do so. It's about the essential fact that he is his father's only son, which is so much more than all the above.

The same is true in the other direction—the relationship of a father to his son. When Hashem states, "No matter what, you are My children," it's not because we will certainly repent. We're dealing with a much deeper dimension—the essential connection of the Jewish nation to Hashem as His children.

## IS TESHUVAH NECESSARY?

It is this fundamental connection that is revealed on Yom Kippur. When this level is revealed, there was never a sin to begin with, because we are dealing with a dimension that is much more profound than commands and whether they were kept.

Of course, when we tap into this dimension, we surely won't sin, and even if we did, we will surely repent. However, that's not the focus here; the focus is on something much more intrinsic.

Accordingly, when the Gemara says that Yom Kippur itself atones for sin, it doesn't mean that this is what Yom Kippur is all about. What it means is that on Yom Kippur the connection of the Jewish nation to Hashem as

His children is revealed, and *automatically* their sins are also wiped away.

(This is similar to crowning Hashem as king on Rosh Hashanah, which is not just about resolving to fulfill His commands, but rather the inherent fact that He is our King and we are His servants. Yom Kippur represents an even deeper place—where we are inherently Hashem's *children*.)

The argument between Rebbi and the Sages revolves around how far this connection must be expressed on a practical level. Rebbi maintains that *teshuvah* is unnecessary. We see that on Yom Kippur Jews are drawn to *shul*, not necessarily to repent but because "today is Yom Kippur!" Even observant Jews may not translate the day's inspiration into practical *teshuvah*, but they are aroused by the power of the moment. Rebbi holds that this intrinsic connection is enough.

The *halachah*, however, follows the opinion of the Sages that this is not sufficient, and our identity as Hashem's children must be channeled into actual repentance. But even so, the essence of Yom Kippur is not about the regret and resolve, but about realizing that we are connected to Hashem, and that this is what truly defines us.

## FROM ONE TO SEVEN

Another element where Yom Kippur's unique quality is expressed:

Yom Kippur was preceded by seven days in which the Kohen Gadol would prepare himself for the *avodah*, making Yom Kippur the eighth day. The Gemara compares this to the seven days of *miluim*, which was followed by the revelation of Hashem's glory on the eighth day.

Explaining the uniqueness of the number eight, the Kli Yakar writes that creation is characterized by systems of seven, while eight signifies a level that is beyond creation. This is what Yom Kippur is all about—a relationship that far surpasses any world-related aspect.

We find the number eight in another area of Yom Kippur as well: the eight sprays of blood on the *aron* and *paroches*. However, instead of seven preceding the eighth, here an opposite order was used: the Kohen Gadol sprayed blood first once upward, and then seven times downward.

This demonstrates that on Yom Kippur, we immediately begin with the essential element of the day, where our identity as Hashem's children is revealed. However, this is not enough; the Yom Kippur experience must be translated into improved behavior throughout the year (following the opinion of the Sages, as described above). Therefore, the initial spray is followed by seven, translating the essence of the day into the seven *midos*.

For further learning see *Likkutei Sichos* vol. 4, pp. 1149ff. *Sefer Hamaamarim Melukat – Tishrei-Cheshvan* pp. 74-75, 80.



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