

(Dvar Torah continued from the front page...)

However, I am then reminded of the last Mishnah at the end of *Masekhet Yoma* (8:9), the tractate devoted to Yom Kippur: "Rabbi Akiva said, 'Fortunate are you, Israel, before whom do you become pure and who purifies you? Your Father in Heaven, as it is said, 'I will sprinkle pure water upon you and you shall be pure.'" Ezekiel 35:25) And it says: 'O hope (*mikveh*) of Israel, O Lord' (Jeremiah 17:1). Just as a *mikveh* (ritual bath) purifies the impure, so too does the Holy Blessed One purify Israel." This homily of Rabbi Akiva is disconnected from the rest of the Mishnah and clearly reflects a desire to end the tractate on an upbeat note.

The Gerer Rebbe, Rabbi Yehudah Leib Alter, in commenting on this Mishnah (Sefat Emet 5641) notes that it tells us a great deal about the nature of Yom Kippur. For the *mikveh* to be efficacious for ritual purposes, one must be totally immersed. Even one hair outside the mikveh invalidates the immersion. To fully serve God requires total immersion in Godliness. Every Yom Kippur, for one day, a Jew can attain a small measure of this *mikveh*-like characteristic by enveloping themselves in the holiness and power of the day.

Even if we do not achieve complete *teshuvah*, Yom Kippur provides us with the potential to emerge from its holy waters, if not a totally new person, then at least with the potential to be a better version of ourself. Thanks to the catharsis and purification of God's forgiveness, we have renewed hope.



Fuchsberg Jerusalem Center Conservative Yeshiva

TORAH SPARKS

Yom Kippur

September 28, 2020 | Tishrei 10 5781

Torah Reading: Leviticus 16:1-34; Maftir Numbers 29:7-11
Haftarah I (Isaiah 57:14-58:14)

Teshuvah and Hope (Yom Kippur)

Rabbi Alan Iser, Adjunct Professor of Theology at St. Joseph's University and St. Charles Borromeo Seminary in Philadelphia and CY Faculty

Some years, during Elul and the Days of Awe, I feel melancholy. I think of all the ways in the previous year I had hoped and vowed to improve myself morally and I realize my process of *teshuvah* has fallen short. Yom Kippur comes, and when I recite the *Al Chet* litany or think of all my own sins of omission and commission, I am reminded of the myth of Sisyphus. In this Greek myth, Sisyphus is condemned to roll a huge boulder up a steep hill, only to have it roll down the hill, every time he gets near the top. My *teshuvah* feels laborious and incomplete. While I might give myself a "B+" for effort, my final grade is an Incomplete.

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(Dvar Torah continued on the back page...)

D'var Haftarah (Yom Kippur): God's Role in Israel's Tribulations

Rabbi Mordecai Silverstein (from the archives)

With the onset of Yom Kippur, we potentially still find ourselves distant from God. This distance seems so pronounced because the process of 'teshuvah' – repentance – remains overwhelming. How can we who are so ensconced in who we are actually bring about the kind of change which will make reconciliation with God possible? We so fear change, even change for the good, that our relationship with God seems irreconcilable. Even more than actually fearing change, we doubt our ability to affect change, afraid that we simply lack the strength to make it possible. Consequently, the sinner is trapped in who he or she has become and for those of us for whom sin has become habitual, we feel enslaved in our own personal darkness, captive to ways which do not allow us to appreciate who and what we really are and want to be, victims of fate, rather than shapers of destiny.

It is possible that the sages chose the haftarah for the morning of Yom Kippur to answer this bleak assessment of the human condition. Isaiah's prophecy opens with the following pronouncement: "[The Lord] says: Build up, build up a highway! Clear a road! Remove all obstacles from the road of My people! For thus said He who high aloft forever dwells, whose name is holy: I dwell on high in holiness; yet with the contrite and the lowly in spirit – reviving the hearts of the contrite. For I will not always contend, I will not be angry forever: Nay, I who make spirits flag also create the breath of life." (57:14-16)

Rabbi David Kimche (13th century Provence) asserts that this message was aimed at those returning from exile. God will make it easy for the people to return both physically and spiritually. The road will be cleared and the path will be paved. Kimche identifies Israel's enemies as their major impediment. Rashi maintains that this prophecy is meant for Israel. God tells them to prepare the way for God to enter their lives by clearing the path of their evil inclinations so that there will be room for God in their lives.

Rabbi J.B. Soloveitchik (20th century USA) offers an interesting reading of this passage which takes Rashi's tack one step further, answering the existential concerns mentioned above. He notes that the highway is for God to enter into the lives of His people because without Him, they will be incapable of achieving their goals of teshuva and reconciliation with Him. God, who created human beings is aware of human inadequacies. He comes, figuratively, to knock at their doors, welcoming the sinner to leave his evil ways, out of His great love for his creatures. He cannot abide leaving them broken down and abandoned. He comes to them especially because of their fallen state. If they had not fallen, there would not be the need for Him to intervene. God wants us to know that we will never be left alone when we are in a troubled state. Yom Kippur, then, is the ultimate symbol of God's intervention to raise us up when we are in our most dire straits. (Yemei Zicharon, pp. 243-4)

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Is It Raining Torah? (Haazinu)

Vered Hollander-Goldfarb (CY Faculty)

Text: Devarim 32:1-2

(1) Give ear, O heavens, that I may speak

And let the earth hear my mouth's utterances

(2) Let my teachings (lekah) drop (ya'arof) like rain/ My sayings flow like dew

Like showers on the green/ and like cloudbursts on the grass

- Why do you think that Moshe calls on heavens and earth when addressing the people with a covenantal poem?
- Moshe expressed a great fear of speaking at the beginning of his mission. How many manners of speech can you find in these Pesukim? What happened to Moshe over 40 years? What do you think brought about these changes?

Commentary: Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch Devarim 32:2

Ya'arof (drop) - the Oref is the neck, the most bendable part in a person, if the person is inclined to bend...and the opposite is 'rough neck'. That is why this was the verb chosen: The act of the rain is to break up the hard parts of the earth.

Lekah [from the root l.k.h 'to take'] – (My teachings) – this [term] is from the point of view of the student – the teaching that takes root... in his heart

- In honor of all students and teachers: How does S.R. Hirsch see the relationship of teaching and learning? Do you agree? Why?

Moshe's mission was composed of two elements: teaching and promise. He expects that the reciprocal action of heavens and earth in setting the future of his people will preserve the two elements of his mission, so that in the end they will reach their goal. Knowing that the heavens and earth were appointed by the LORD to serve as witnesses and guarantors of the covenant of the LORD, Moshe expects that they will not rest until his Torah become "lekach" (teachings) that is accepted and absorbed by the nation. It will ...break up it's hard earth so that the seeds of warmth and light, knowledge and life, will grow and bear fruit. He expects that his promise will revive the nation and encourage them in the difficult times that lie ahead of them.

- After following Moshe for close to 4 books, what do you feel is the promise that Hirsch sees as a central element of Moshe's mission?

- What action of heavens and earth will determine the future of the people, and how do you think that that will that help them internalize the promise and teaching of Moshe?

We welcome your comments: torahsparks@uscj.org