



Yom Kippur

Atonement and Opportunity



Rabbi Yaakov Hillel





From the Writings of **Rabbi Yaakov Hillel**
Rosh Yeshivat Ahavat Shalom

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This publication about Yom Kippur

is dedicated by

Ezekiel and **Hazel Elias**

and their children

Hanna and **Yisroel Benjamin**

Khedoori and **Rivka Elias**

and **Nahom Elias**

May they be blessed with much berachah,
hatzlachah, and happiness, and many semahot in
their home. May Hashem grant them all a good and
healthy new year and a gemar hatimah tovah.

Rabbi Yaakov Hillel





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Facets of Repentance



Unpacking the Suitcase

The weeks from *Rosh Hodesh* Elul until Simhat Torah in Tishre are a period of unmatched opportunity for our people. Each segment of this time has its own distinctive character and special *mitzvot*. Utilizing Elul, the *Aseret Yeme Teshuvah* (Ten Days of Repentance) and the Festivals as our Sages and great Torah teachers advise will help us repent and come closer to Hashem.

The Ramhal often explains that concerning any topic, there is a concept of a *klal*, a whole, which encompasses myriad details, the *peratim* (see the Ramhal's introduction to *Derech Hashem*). We can compare this to a traveler who has a suitcase

prepacked with clothing, accessories, and whatever else he will need on his travels. With everything neatly held together in the suitcase, he can look through the contents and select items as they become necessary. Without the suitcase, his possessions will soon be a scattered, tangled mess. The same is true of any topic we undertake to study. Like the traveler, we need a *klal* as our starting point. Then we can begin to examine and make use of the many *peratim* it contains.

Every stage of Elul and Tishre has its own “suitcase.” Elul and much of Tishre revolve around *teshuvah* (repentance). The basic principles of *teshuvah* remain the same throughout.¹ Since *teshuvah* and its requirements do not change, why do we need the different stages of Elul, Rosh Hashanah, the Ten Days of Repentance, Yom Kippur, and Sukkot?

It is because every period during this span of time has its own essence, or in the terminology of the Ramhal, its own *klal*. Understanding the essence of each stage of Elul and Tishre will help

1. See below, “Confession.”

us use the power inherent in that time period to enhance and intensify the *peratim* of our *teshuvah*. If we first acquire a general appreciation and understanding of the different stages of Elul and Tishre, we will be able to “unpack” the specifics from our “suitcase” when we are ready for them.

The Tunnel

The days of *teshuvah* begin in Elul, a month that is especially conducive to repentance. Sephardic communities begin saying *Selihot* in Elul, and Ashekenazic communities blow the *shofar* every morning, practices geared to heightening our awareness of the need for *teshuvah*. It is a time when it is easier for us to come close to Hashem. This is alluded to in the name of the month itself; Elul is an acrostic for *ani l’dodi v’dodi li*, “I am for my beloved, and my beloved is for me” (*Shir HaShirim* 6:3). The opportunities to develop a closer, deeper relationship with Hashem are there waiting for us, and it would be a mistake not to grasp them while we can.

Our Sages illustrate this concept with a vivid parable. A band of thieves was caught and

imprisoned. They dug a tunnel, and used it to break out of their cell. They made their escape, but there was one prisoner who did not go with them. Rather than taking advantage of this avenue to freedom, he chose to stay behind in jail. When the jailer came to the cell and found this lone prisoner seated near the tunnel, he did not applaud his obedience to prison rules; he beat him with a stick! “Fool,” he told him. “The tunnel is right here in front of you. Why didn’t you hurry to escape and save yourself?” (*Kohelet Rabbah* 7:15, cited in *Shaare Teshuvah* 1:2).

Especially in Elul and the *Aseret Yeme Teshuvah*, we have a truly golden opportunity to free ourselves from the “prison” of our *yetzer hara* (evil inclination). One who instead prefers to remain stuck in the same place is both foolish and wicked – he makes light of life itself.

Our Sages also use the analogy of a tunnel in their account of the story of King Menashe, as a symbol of the possibility of repentance even in cases that seem beyond hope. Menashe was the grossly wicked son of the very pious King Hizkiyahu. Not only was he a sinner and idolater,

he used his power and position to force the nation into sin as well. One day the tide turned against Menashe, and he found himself in terrible trouble. At this crucial moment he remembered Hashem, and repented (II *Divre HaYamim* 33:10–17). Because of his many excesses and his role as an instigator, his repentance was not easily and automatically accepted.

To allow for Menashe's repentance, Hashem had to bypass the complaints of the angels, so to speak, and create a special tunnel for him under His Throne of Glory, where the angels and their accusations had no power.² The Sages tell us why he was granted this exceptional privilege: it was to show future generations of penitents that with sufficient effort, the door to repentance can always be opened, even for the very worst sinners (*Rut Rabbah* 5:6).

2. In *Sanhedrin*, the Sages write that Hashem bypassed the Attribute of Justice and created a special tunnel from earth to Heaven to allow Menashe to ascend (*Sanhedrin* 103a).

The idea of a tunnel specifically “beneath Hashem’s Throne of Glory” is especially significant. Our Sages teach that the souls of the Jewish people descend from “beneath the Throne of Glory” (*Zohar*, vol. III, p. 29b). A sinner cuts himself off from the source of his soul.³ Repentance reconnects the soul to its source, beneath Hashem’s Throne.

The Teshuvah of Elul

The “*klal*,” or fundamental principle, of Elul is proper use of *behirah hofshit*, man’s Free Will, to choose life.

The *parashah* of *Re’eh* always falls near the beginning of the month of Elul. *Re’eh* begins with the concept of *behirah hofshit*: “See, I have put before you today a blessing and a curse. A blessing, if you will listen to the commandments of Hashem your G-d which I command you today. And a curse, if you do not listen to the commandments of Hashem your G-d” (*Devarim*

3. This extremely severe punishment is known as *karet*, literally “excision.”

11:26–28). This theme continues in *Nitzavim*, the last *parashah* read in Elul, with the verses, “See, I place before you today life and good, and death and bad” (ibid. 30:15). The Sages tell us that these verses teach us the principle of man’s Free Will (*Sifre, Parashat Re’eh* 53; *Devarim Rabbah* 4:1, 2,3. See also Rambam, *Hilchot Teshuvah* 5:3). The Torah does not simply inform us that choice exists, it specifies the type of choice we should be making: “And you will choose life” (ibid. 30:19).

Where does our choice lie?

This world offers blessing, life, and good, in the form of the Torah and *mitzvot* that make our lives here worth living, and earn us eternal life in the World to Come. Torah is life itself: “The more Torah, the more life” (*Avot* 2:7). On a more profound level, the Jewish soul is a *helek Eloka mimaal*, a G-dly entity that descends from the higher spiritual worlds, yet remains forever rooted in Heaven. Through the soul, we can cleave to Hashem and live: “And you who cleave to Hashem your G-d are all alive today” (*Devarim* 4:4).

This is why the Sages teach that the wicked, even while alive, are considered dead, and the righteous, even after death, are considered alive (see *Berachot* 18a-b). In this world, the wicked have no Torah, *mitzvot*, or connection to Hashem – they are detached from the source of life even during the years they spend here, and they surely have no life in the World to Come. In contrast, the righteous live on in the World to Come even after the death of their physical body, on a level higher than we can imagine.

This is the truth, as taught by our Sages; their words need no proof. And yet, I have often been asked how this can be. The wicked certainly do appear to be full of life, active and on the move. My answer is that life is not defined by movement, but by the presence of the soul. A chicken is dead when the slaughterer cuts the windpipe and the esophagus, but even afterwards, it jerks and jumps. This is not life – it is the action of reflexes that are still in operation even after death. The frenetic activity of the wicked is like the twitching and tossing of a slaughtered chicken.

Certainly for a Torah student or scholar, the choice should be clear, and it really should not be that difficult. Do we want to be connected to Hashem, or would we rather be a cat? A cat enjoys a freewheeling existence, eating, sleeping, and leaping into trash cans to revel in the trash. It is an insult to a human being created in the image of G-d to suggest that he could even consider wasting his intellect and spiritual soul by living like a cat, but it is either one or the other. With Torah, we have life in this world and the next, and we should be investing our mind, heart, and energy in its study and fulfillment. Without it, we go nowhere, all too similar to a cat...

One of the greatest works on the process of spiritual growth and development is the Ramhal's classic *Mesillat Yesharim*. Based on Rabbi Pinhas ben Yair's *baraita*, he lists a progression consisting of many stages, each building on the one before. It all begins with Torah: "Torah leads to watchfulness," and from there, step by step, to increasingly advanced levels culminating in *Ruah HaKodesh* (*Avodah Zarah* 20b).

In the larger sense, Elul is the time for us to choose life, or in other words, Torah – it is only through Torah that we can link ourselves to Hashem, the Source of all life. Once we have this *klal* in place, we can learn about and work on the *peratim* of Torah study, fulfillment of the *mitzvot*, refining *middot*, and interpersonal relationships.

Malchut

Rosh Hashanah, the Day of Judgment, begins the Ten Days of Repentance which conclude with Yom Kippur. The overriding theme of Rosh Hashanah is acceptance of Hashem as *Melech* – the King Who rules over all of Creation. In the words of the Sages, “Say before Me on Rosh Hashanah *malchuyot*⁴... so that you will crown Me as your King” (*Rosh Hashanah* 16a). The concept of Hashem as *Melech* is carried through the entire Rosh Hashanah liturgy.⁵

4. The portion of the prayers in which we express our acceptance of Hashem as *Melech*.

5. For example, *HaMelech HaKadosh* (the Holy King); *HaMelech HaMishpat* (the King of Justice); *im k’vanim, im*

On Rosh Hashanah we internalize that “There is judgment, and there is a judge” (*Bereshit Rabbah* 26:6). Hashem created the world for a purpose – our fulfillment of Torah and *mitzvot*. In the bluntest of terms, if we obey Him, we will be rewarded, and if we transgress, we will be punished. We are servants of Hashem, and as our King, He decrees every event that takes place in our lives. Any blessing and good fortune, or any suffering and trouble, large or small, are directly from Him. They are intended either to reward us and help us do good, or to punish us for misdeeds; “A King with judgment establishes the land” (*Mishle* 29:4).

Accepting the yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven is the first stage of repentance, as well as an essential preliminary condition. This is because the realization that there is a King Who rules all of Creation and Who judges His created beings, ourselves included, is a powerful motivation for personal scrutiny, leading to repentance. Working

ka'avadim (whether like sons [serving their Father], or like servants [serving their King]).

from this *klal*, we can go on to the *peratim* of the week that follows – the days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

Restoring the Soul

Rosh Hashanah is also the beginning of the increased connection to spirituality that reaches its peak on Yom Kippur.⁶

To understand why this is so, we first need to know more about man's soul. The soul consists of five levels. In ascending order, they are *nefesh*-soul; *ruah*-spirit; *neshamah*-higher soul; *hayah*-living soul; and *yehidah*-unique soul (*Bereshit Rabbah* 14:9). These five levels correspond to the five times King David said *Barchi Nafshi*, "Let my soul bless Hashem" (*Tehillim* 103:1,2,22; 104:1,35). The *Zohar* (vol. II, p. 94b) teaches that man does not acquire all five levels at once. As he reaches different stages of growth in Torah and *mitzvot*, he is imbued with increasingly higher levels of the soul. *Nefesh*, the lowest level, is instilled at birth. When we begin learning Torah, we receive *ruah*.

6. See below, "Seeing Spirituality."

When we become obligated to fulfill *mitzvot* with *kavanah*,⁷ we receive *neshamah*. As we grow great in understanding of Torah and the deeper *kavanot*⁸ of the *mitzvot*, we are endowed with the level of the soul called *hayah*. *Yehidah*, the highest level of the soul, is instilled when we reach the level of taking joy in fulfilling *mitzvot*.

One who sins causes his G-dly soul to depart. The more he sins, the more parts of his soul leave him. This is why the wicked are considered dead even while they are still alive; with every sin, more and more of their soul is gone, emptying them of their spiritual life force. Some will be left with only the smallest remaining part of the *nefesh*, or the *nefesh habahamit* (base or animalistic soul). In contrast, the more *mitzvot* we fulfill, the greater our soul becomes and the more we perfect it. This is why *tzaddikim*, more than anyone, are truly alive.

Rosh Hashanah is “a day of *teruah*” (*Bamidbar* 29:1). *Teruah* is the sound of the *shofar*. We blow

7. Intent to obey the Will of the Creator.

8. Profound Kabbalistic intents.

three types of *shofar* blasts on Rosh Hashanah: *tekiah*, a long, uninterrupted sound; *shevarim*, three short blasts; and *teruah*, nine very short blasts. The *shevarim* and *teruah*, reminiscent of sobbing and crying, are the cry of our souls, weeping over our sins and our neglect of Hashem and His Torah and *mitzvot*. In between each set of *shofar* blasts, we silently confess our sins and reflect on repentance (*Shaar HaKavanot*, p. 90a; *Magen Avraham* 52:3).

We can suggest that when the *baal tokea* blows the *shofar*, Hashem blows along with him, so to speak, restoring the levels of the soul we lost through our sins. This parallels the way Hashem inserted a G-dly soul into Adam, the first man, on the sixth day of Creation, the first Rosh Hashanah: “And He blew into his nostrils a living soul, and man became a living being” (*Bereshit* 2:7). This process is reenacted every year, with the blowing of the *shofar*. We hear the breath blown into the *shofar* in the form of *tekiot*, *shevarim*, and *teruot*, reminding us to repent and return to the Creator.

Commitment

This is the time for us to plan the *teshuvah* we will carry out in the Ten Days of Repentance. It is a crucial hour on a crucial day. Our future hangs in the balance, and with this in mind, we should be making a serious commitment to repent and improve. Realistically, however, we will not be capable of a complete turnaround in every aspect of our lives, all at once. With this in mind, the Rashash suggests that we make *one* serious commitment that we are certain we can stick to. This is enough for us to qualify as a *baal teshuvah* (penitent) at the all-important moment when we hear the *shofar*, and enough to tip the balance, not only for ourselves, but for our family, community, and even for the entire world (*Mussar L'Rosh Hashanah*).⁹

9. Our Sages teach that when we fulfill a *mitzvah*, we tilt the Heavenly balance scale to the side of merit for the entire world. If we transgress, the entire world will be weighed down by our sin (*Kiddushin* 40b; Rambam, *Hilchot Teshuvah* 3:4).

One possible example is a decision to recite the blessing *shehakol nihiyah b'devaro* with proper concentration and attention, as outlined in the *Shulhan Aruch* and *Mishnah Berurah* (*Orah Hayyim* 5). This alone is an important achievement that can have a great impact; as our Sages teach, “One *mitzvah* leads to another” (*Avot* 4:2). It is important to remember that taking on too much all at once will not work. Even if we are able to maintain it for a short time, we will fall, and end up with nothing. In this sense, we need to begin with one item out of the “suitcase” – not the entire load.

Practically speaking, how are we to take this small step? On the one hand, comfortable habits have a powerful grip. On the other, the *yetzer hara* is happy to tell us that we are hopeless sinners from head to foot, in need of a complete overhaul in every possible area. The very thought of it is enough to make us give up even before we start, and this is precisely what the *yetzer hara* wants.

We can find the answer in the teachings of our Sages: “The Holy One, blessed be He, says to Israel, My children, open for Me an opening

of repentance as small as the head of a needle, and I will open for you an opening large enough for wagons to enter” (*Shir HaShirim Rabbah* 5:3), and “One who comes to purify himself is granted assistance” (*Yoma* 38b). If only we take the first step in the right direction, Hashem will help us. This first step on our part need not even be so very big, as long as it comes from us (see *Malachi* 3:7), and as long as it is sincere. With His help, we can overcome the *yetzer hara* that pulls us back, and start on the path of repentance. “Man’s evil inclination attempts to overpower him every day...and if not for the Holy One, blessed be He, Who helps him, he would not be able to overcome it” (*Sukkah* 52b). The *yetzer hara* is endlessly creative, and has a new technique to outsmart us every day we live. Alone, we are helpless against him, but with Hashem at our side, we can do it.

Even if we have not yet acted on our commitment, it is already valuable and significant, as we learn from a teaching of the Sages’ concerning the laws of marriage. If a man betroths a woman, and while giving her the ring says, “You are betrothed to me on the condition that I am righteous,” she

is considered a married woman (*Kiddushin* 49b). This is true even if at the moment he is actually entirely wicked, and not righteous in the least. Why? Because he may have made a mental commitment to repent and improve. At present he may have done nothing positive at all, but because he is sincerely determined to change for the better, the Sages say that this act of betrothal has enough value to be of significant standing in halachah.

Bottom line, Hashem is the only One Who can truly assess what is in man's heart. In the words of the Rambam, complete *teshuvah* is so profound that "He Who knows what is hidden will testify that he will not return to this sin forever" (*Hilchot Teshuvah* 2:2). But if he is truly committed, he is already credited even with the *mitzvot* he has not yet fulfilled.

Confession on Rosh Hashanah

The concept of repentance at the time of the *tekiot* helps us answer an obvious question concerning Rosh Hashanah. As we will explain,

confession is integral to *teshuvah*,¹⁰ and on Yom Kippur, the great day of *teshuvah*, we confess numerous times. On Rosh Hashanah, our prayers are focused on the concept of Hashem's Kingship, and we do not confess at all. Other than the special prayers, we celebrate it as a Festival (see *Nehemiah* 8:10). In what sense, then, is Rosh Hashanah part of the Ten Days of Repentance?

The answer is that there *is* *Viduy* (confession) on Rosh Hashanah. We confess between the sets of *tekiot*, although only in a whisper and in our thoughts. The Rashash writes that the *shofar* blasts are only effective in sweetening Divine Judgment if they are accompanied by *Viduy* and thoughts of *teshuvah* (*Nehar Shalom*, p. 38d). During the seven days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, these thoughts of *teshuvah* are implemented in actual practice.

Opportunity

Aseret Yeme Teshuvah, the days from Rosh Hashanah until Yom Kippur, are an opportunity

10. See below, "Confession."

that comes once a year. The *klal* for *Aseret Yeme Teshuvah*, repentance through acceptance of the yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven, is established on Rosh Hashanah. During the seven days that follow, we should use the inspiration to choose life gained in Elul, and the *Malchuyot* and heightened spirituality of Rosh Hashanah, to transform our *teshuvah* from theory to fact. This is the time to scrutinize our actions carefully, and commit to improving ourselves and striving for perfection.

The prophet Yeshayahu said, “Seek out Hashem while He can be found, call Him when He is close” (*Yeshayahu* 55:6). The Sages tell us, “These are the ten days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur” (*Rosh Hashanah* 18a). This is the time when He is close to us, and is there for us. We should be using these days for honest introspection, evaluating where we fall short and could do better, and turning them into the beginning of the life we should be living.

To prepare for Yom Kippur, I suggest looking at the comprehensive *Viduy Ha’Aroch* (“Long Confession”), found in *Musaf* in Sephardic *mahzorim*. Going through it in advance of Yom

Kippur, perhaps underlining relevant lines and taking notes, rather than waiting until it is time to recite it in the synagogue, can give us an idea of where we should be holding spiritually and in our fulfillment of *mitzvot*, and how we are actually doing. It will also serve as a reminder of what is hanging in the balance, and the efforts we should be putting in so that we will be inscribed for life, in “the Book of the Righteous.”

Confession

The process which began in Elul and continued through the Ten Days of Repentance culminates in Yom Kippur, the ultimate day of *teshuvah* when we confess our sins and achieve forgiveness and atonement. On Yom Kippur, the Heavenly verdict written on Rosh Hashanah is sealed. *Viduy* (confession) is central to Yom Kippur, and we confess numerous times throughout the day. The Rambam writes that Yom Kippur is the conclusion of the days of repentance (*Hilchot Teshuvah* 2:7). Based on Scriptural verses and the teachings of the Sages, the Rambam outlines the various stages of the process of repentance: abandonment of the

sin, sincere regret, the commitment not to sin in the future, and verbalized confession (ibid. 2:1–2).

He derives *mitzvat hateshuvah* (the obligation to repent) from the verses, “A man or a woman who commits any of man’s sins...and they will confess their sin that they committed” (*Bamidbar* 5:6–7). He writes, “This oral confession is a positive commandment.” *Viduy* is the main component of repentance (ibid. 1:1). We also find allusion to this principle in the verse, “For it is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart to fulfill it” (*Devarim* 30:11). This verse refers to the *mitzvah* of *teshuvah*. “In your mouth” is oral confession, and “in your heart” is abandoning sin, regret, and the commitment not to sin in the future.

Seeing Spirituality

Yom Kippur itself is a day of total spirituality, when physical needs are set aside and we spend the day in prayer and confession. The halachot of Yom Kippur reflect its unique nature: we refrain from eating and drinking; bathing; anointing the body; wearing leather shoes; and marital relations. By suppressing physicality to the best of

our ability through the five afflictions, we enhance spirituality. These five afflictions correspond to the five prayers on Yom Kippur: *Maariv* at night, *Shaharit*, *Musaf*, and *Minhah*, followed by *Ne'ilah* as the day concludes, which correspond to the five levels of the soul.¹¹ The prayers on Yom Kippur uplift us, stage by stage, to the level of angels, who are spiritual, not physical. On this one day of the year, we can say *Baruch Shem K'vod Malchuto L'olam Va'ed*¹² aloud, as the angels do (*Devarim Rabbah* 2:36).

This is the *klal* of Yom Kippur: total spirituality. The *peratim* are the principles of repentance. Due to the intense spirituality of Yom Kippur and the profound clarity it brings, we become capable of recognizing our shortcomings and truly, fully repenting.

We can gain insight into the loftiest levels of spirituality that man is capable of achieving from Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin. He explains the

11. See above, "Restoring the Soul."

12. "Blessed is the Name of the honor of His Kingdom forever."

difference between our perception of physical and spiritual entities, and how they are reversed in one who achieves an extremely high spiritual plane.

When the Torah was given at Mount Sinai, “The entire nation saw the voices” (*Shemot* 20:15). Rashi, quoting the *Mechilta*, explains that “they saw that which is heard, which is impossible to see elsewhere. They saw the voices emanating from the Mouth of the Almighty.” They also heard what is usually only seen (see *Nefesh HaHayyim*, *Shaar Gimel*, chapter 11, note). The intense, incomparable experience of the Giving of the Torah elevated the Jewish people to an exalted, unequalled spiritual plane: the eye was capable of perceiving what is usually only discernible to the ear, and the ear could hear what is ordinarily only seen, a complete departure from what we know to be natural and normal.

Ordinarily, when we see a physical entity, we can immediately recognize and identify it, with no need for further explanation or discussion. We see a table or a tree, and that alone is enough to

tell us what they are. We see a familiar person, and it is clear to us who he is.

Spiritual entities are different – they are invisible to the human eye. We cannot see G-d, Who has no physical form, or even angels, who are spiritual entities.¹³ We cannot even picture our own souls, much less understand what they are.¹⁴ We are unable to see spirituality, we can only “hear” it, or in other words, gain some comprehension of a spiritual concept by hearing it explained. This is the meaning of the verse that is our people’s declaration of faith in Hashem: *Shema Yisrael, Hashem Elokenu, Hashem Ehad* (“Hear O Israel, Hashem our G-d, Hashem is One”). The *Seforno*

13. The descriptions of angels in the Books of the Prophets are not literal. They are analogies to spiritual concepts. The non-Jewish world took them at face value, resulting in the popular image found in pictures and sculptures of angels who look like men with wings.

14. In the 1600’s, Rabbi Menashe ben Yisrael wrote a work entitled *Nishmat Yisrael* in an attempt to explain the concept of the soul.

explains the word *Shema* (“hear”): “Reflect and understand this.”¹⁵

When the Jews were at Mount Sinai, this changed. They were able to see a prophetic vision of the revelation of the *Shechinah* (Divine Presence), accompanied by the Heavenly Legions, when Hashem descended to give His Torah to the Jewish people. They saw what is ordinarily heard, or in other words, can only be grasped through explanation, not by means of the eye.

On the other hand, they were so detached from physicality at this time that material entities were meaningless and incomprehensible. They would have responded to the sight of a rock or bush with total lack of comprehension – familiar visual stimuli meant nothing to them, and to understand them, they would have needed to hear a detailed explanation of what they were. The spiritual experience was so intense that they

15. The entire purpose of the study of *Kabbalah* is to explain the spiritual concepts of the Oneness of G-d, how He created the World, and how He relates to Creation.

lost their usual connection to physicality (*Nefesh HaHayyim, Shaar Gimel*, chapter 11, note).

On our own level, Yom Kippur should be a day when we disconnect from our attachment to materialism and physical needs, akin to the angels. Our perception of the physicality surrounding us should change, allowing us to view it as nothing more than a stage set. At the same time, our comprehension of spirituality as reality should be sharpened and heightened. We can achieve this through *yirat Shamayim*, powerful awareness and fear of Hashem's Presence.

Repenting with Love

Our service of Hashem in Elul is *behirah hofshit*: using our Free Will to make the right choices, or in other words, choosing Torah and *mitzvot* – life and good – over death and bad. On Rosh Hashanah it is *Malchut*, acknowledging Hashem as the One King of all that exists. The seven days of *teshuvah* between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur is the time when we take practical steps toward concrete repentance. Yom Kippur, the conclusion of this period, is a day of spirituality,

confession, forgiveness, and atonement. All of these stages in *teshuvah* are about *teshuvah me'yirah*, “repentance through fear.” But this is not the end of the process. On the days of Sukkot, Hoshanah Rabbah, and Simhat Torah, we go on to the more advanced level of *teshuvah me'ahavah*, “repentance through love.”

The *Zohar* teaches that the period of Divine judgment does not end on Yom Kippur. Our decree for the coming year is written on Rosh Hashanah, signed on Yom Kippur, and then endorsed on the night of Hoshanah Rabbah. At that point, the decree is handed over to the agents of the Heavenly court (see *Amude Horaah, Moreh B'etzba* 9:36).

We may be surprised to learn that according to the *Mekubalim*, the court's ruling for the new year is activated not on Rosh Hashanah or even Yom Kippur, but after *Musaf* on Simhat Torah, the last day of the Festival season in Tishre. It follows that any suffering and punishment inflicted between Rosh Hashanah and Simhat Torah are not part of the new year's judgment – they are left over from the previous year. It is from Simhat Torah on that

the Forces of Evil are granted permission to begin carrying out the verdict of the Heavenly Court for the new year.

During Sukkot when the final verdict is still pending, we are granted the opportunity to repent on a yet higher level, that of *teshuvah me'ahavah*. Our Sages teach that when our repentance is inspired by love of Hashem, and not only by fear, even intentional sins are transformed into merits (*Yoma* 86b). We find allusion to this in the laws of Sukkot: "The refuse of the threshing-floor and the vineyard" (*Sukkah* 12a) is uplifted when it is used for *sechach*, the "roof" of the *sukkah*. The Sages teach that "the Name of Heaven rests upon the *sukkah*" (*Sukkah* 9a), a reference to the *sechach*. The Hebrew word *sukkah* has the same *gematriya*¹⁶ as two of the Divine Names, the *Shem Havayah* (composed of the letters *yud-keh-vav-keh*) and the Name of *Adnut* (composed of the letters *alef-dalet-nun-yud*). Our simple leaves and branches

16. In the Hebrew alphabet, in addition to the meaning of any given word expressed by the characters read as letters, it also has a numerical equivalent (*gematriya*) composed of the value of its letters in numbers.

become *tzila d'mehemanuta*, “the shade of the Divine Presence” (*Zohar*, vol. III, p. 103a).

With this in mind, we can understand our Sages' teaching that Sukkot is “the first day in the reckoning of sins” (*Tanhuma*, *Emor* 22). This seems surprising; why is the fifteenth day of Tishre considered to be the beginning of the new record? The Sages explain that until then, we were busy with repentance, and after Yom Kippur, with the preparations necessary for the *mitzvot* of Sukkot. After that, beginning with the first day of Sukkot, we are more relaxed, and have enough time on our hands to lapse back into sin....

We can also explain this teaching differently. Sukkot is the day when we begin the stage of “repentance through love,” transforming intentional sins into *mitzvot*. On Sukkot we can take lowly, discarded greenery, symbolic of past sins, and turn it into the sanctity of the *sukkah*. When we achieve this level, we reach Simhat Torah, the very peak of joy, even greater than that of Shavuot, when the Torah was given.

On Shavuot we received the Torah as a gift from Hashem, and on this Festival, we thank Him for granting us a treasure beyond compare. On Simhat Torah, we do more; we rejoice with the Torah, because we have worked hard during the many weeks of “repentance through fear” and “repentance through love” to return to it and attach ourselves to it.

On Sukkot and Simhat Torah, we have a special abundance of blessing and bounty: the sins that were transformed into *mitzvot* and merit through *teshuvah me’ahavah*. On these sacred days of joy, even the lowliest entities are lifted to great heights, and our perception of the entire world changes.

We build a *sukkah* and cover it with *sechach*, overjoyed to sit beneath a roof made of leaves and sticks. We assemble a bouquet of leaves and braches and wave them around together with a yellow fruit, and are delighted with the privilege. Why? Because we have learned to look beyond the physical and appreciate the spiritual, akin to our ancestors’ experience at Mount Sinai. We can appreciate that “the refuse of the threshing-floor

and the vineyard” is now a sanctified dwelling, worthy of the presence of the *Ushpizin*, and that the Four Species have profound significance and impact.

The same is true of every Jew as well. A Jew may sink very low indeed, degraded by sin and corruption. Through *teshuvah me’ahavah*, he can lift himself up to the point where his sins become merits. Even the worst of our people can now become the most righteous.

The *klal* of Sukkot is repentance through love. Its *peratim* are the same principles of *teshuvah* as in the month of Elul, and on Rosh Hashanah through Yom Kippur: regret, abandonment of sin, commitment not to sin in the future, and confession. Through the love between our people and Hashem on Sukkot, we can elevate these *peratim* to new heights and merit a blessed new year, with an unending wealth of Divine blessing and bounty.



The Power of Confession on Yom Kippur



Facing Judgment

The Ten Days of Repentance are a critical time, when our judgment hangs in the balance. Our Sages teach that on Rosh Hashanah all mankind passes before the Almighty single file, and the deeds of every individual are scrutinized and judged (*Rosh Hashanah* 16a). Three books are opened in Heaven on Rosh Hashanah: “One for those who are entirely wicked; one for those who are entirely righteous; and one for *benonim*, those who are in the middle.” The righteous are immediately judged and inscribed for life, and the

wicked, for death, but the verdict of the *benonim* – for life or for death – is put on hold from Rosh Hashanah until Yom Kippur, allowing them time to repent (ibid. 16b). While Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are observed as Festivals (*Shulhan Aruch Orach Hayyim* 597:1), we do not say *Hallel* on these days (ibid. 584:1). With the books of life and death open and judgment underway, our fear of the outcome is too great to allow us to sing songs of praise (*Rosh Hashanah* 32b). Clearly, these days are serious in the extreme. Our future is on the line and there are no guarantees, not even for the most pious of our people. “The Holy One, blessed be He, is exacting with His righteous ones [even] to a hairsbreadth” (*Yevamot* 121b) – more is expected of them because they are on a higher level.

Our Sages relate that during the final illness of the saintly *Tanna* Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai, he wept when his students came to visit him.

“Light of Israel,” they said to their revered teacher, “why are you crying?”

He told them, “If I were brought before a flesh and blood king, who is here today and tomorrow in the grave; and if he is angry at me, his anger is not eternal; and if he imprisons me... it is not eternal imprisonment; and if he kills me... it is not eternal death; and I can appease him with words and bribe him with money; even so, I would weep [in fear of his judgment]. And now I am being brought before the King of all kings, the Holy One, blessed be He, Who exists for all eternity; [and] if He is angry at me, His anger is eternal;¹⁷ and if He imprisons me... the imprisonment is eternal; and if He kills me... it is eternal death; and I cannot appease Him with words, or bribe Him with money. And not only that, I see two paths before me, one leading to *Gan Eden* and one to

17. If a wicked person dies without repenting, there is no longer any way for him to repent and appease Hashem’s anger after his death. As long as he is alive, he can still repent and annul Hashem’s anger, even in the last moment before death (Rambam, *Hilchot Teshuvah* 2:1). Obviously, if he is given a second chance to return to this world through *gilgul* (reincarnation), he is then obligated to repent and appease Hashem’s anger.

gehinom, and I do not know on which I will be led. Should I not cry?" (*Berachot* 28b).

Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai, one of our people's most outstanding Sages, who was renowned for his piety (see *Sukkah* 28a) and had studied the entire Torah (*Baba Batra* 134a), trembled in the face of Divine judgment. How confident can any of us be about the outcome of the Divine judgment awaiting us?

Confession in Court

Yet we see from the teachings of our Sages and great Torah authorities that it is possible to merit acquittal in the Heavenly Court, or at least avert the full brunt of strict Divine judgment.

The *Zohar* provides a very vivid description of what happens when the Heavenly Court convenes to pass judgment on Rosh Hashanah. The Almighty, the King of the Universe, sits on the Throne of Judgment, so to speak, and judges the world. When the Jewish people fulfill the *mitzvah* of blowing the *shofar* the severity of Divine judgment is sweetened, and the Almighty

rises from the Throne of Judgment and sits on the Throne of Mercy, as it were (*Zohar*, vol. III, p. 99a). Based on this *Zohar*, it seems that it is not all that difficult to arouse Divine mercy on Rosh Hashanah, and be acquitted in the Heavenly Court – all we need to do is blow the *shofar*.

The same appears to be true of Yom Kippur, as we learn from the *Zohar's* explanation of the incident of our Forefather Yitzhak's blessings to his two sons. Yitzhak instructed Esav to go out hunting, and then prepare a meal for Yitzhak with his catch. In the meantime, before Esav returned, Yaakov entered Yitzhak's room with a meal prepared by his mother, Rivkah. Yitzhak partook of the food Yaakov served, and blessed him. By the time Esav brought in his meal, it was too late – he had missed his chance (*Bereshit* 27).

To understand the *Zohar's* explanation of the events surrounding the blessings, we need to appreciate the symbolic significance of the Forefathers and Esav. The Sages teach that each of our Forefathers is associated with a specific Divine Attribute. Avraham is *Hesed* (Lovingkindness); Yitzhak is *Din* (Judgment, also known as *Gevurah*,

Might); and Yaakov is *Rahamim* (Mercy), a blend of *Hesed* and *Din*. Esav is the Accuser, who functions as an extension of his father's Attribute of *Din* and metes out the punishment. Different Divine Attributes are dominant at different times of year. Rosh Hashanah and the days of judgment in Tishre are related to Yitzhak, who personifies *Din* (*Zohar*, vol. I, p. 226b).

The *Zohar* explains the blessings and Yaakov's subsequent encounter with Esav as a reference to the role of these Divine Attributes in the judgment on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. On Rosh Hashanah the Attribute of Strict Justice (*Din* – "Yitzhak") calls upon "Esav" (symbolic of Satan, the Accuser), to present his yearly accumulation of allegations and incriminating evidence against the Jewish people. Presentation of this evidence will allow him to unleash a wave of terrifying punishment against the Jews. However, before Esav can bring in his bulging files of accusations, "Yaakov" is called upon to intervene, and present positive evidence of the repentance and good deeds of the Jewish people. Yaakov represents

Rahamim (*Din* tempered with *Hesed*), the Attribute that grants penitents mercy and compassion.

Accompanied by the sound of the *shofar*, the prayers and confession of the Jewish people (the “delicacies” served by Yaakov and the scent of *Gan Eden* that entered with him; see *Bereshit* 27:27, Rashi) rise to the Heavens, where they awaken Divine Mercy (*Rahamim*). “Yitzhak” then “changes seats,” transferring over from the Attribute of Strict Judgment to the Attribute of Mercy, represented by the Throne of Divine Mercy. Yaakov (*Rahamim*) immediately takes advantage of the situation and begins advocating for the Jewish people, citing the merit of their heartfelt repentance. By the time Esav arrives with his pile of accusations (the product of his “hunt”), it is too late for him to even have a hearing. A lenient verdict has already been issued in his absence, and there is nothing more for him to say.

Esav does not give up, though. Throughout the Ten Days of Repentance he continues his attempts to discredit the Jewish people (Yaakov) by questioning the sincerity of their

repentance, suggesting that it is only a ploy to escape punishment. When that does not work, he attempts to cajole them back into sin. These last efforts are alluded to in the story of Yaakov's encounter with Esav, when he returned from his stay with Lavan. When the brothers prepared to part ways, Esav offered to leave some of his men with Yaakov's family, knowing that their evil influence and example would soon do their work. Yaakov was not taken in, and he declined. He instead told Esav to go ahead on his own until they would meet again, a reference to the final Day of Judgment when they would yet settle accounts (see *Bereshit* 33:12–17). Once freed of Esav's unwanted company, the Jews engage in redoubled fasting, confession, and prayer, to reinforce the merciful ruling issued on Rosh Hashanah. In sum, Esav is appeased with a "gift," the goat sent to Azazel,¹⁸ and Yaakov is spared from harsh judgment (*Raaya Mehemana*, vol. III, pp. 99d–100d).

18. See below, "Preempting the Satan."

The confession on Yom Kippur (*viduy*) is the basis of the plea bargain struck in the Heavenly Court, effectively neutralizing Esav's damaging testimony.

As we said, there appears to be a contradiction. On the one hand, the Sages teach that Divine judgment, for life or for death, is strict, straightforward, and unswerving: "Let judgment pierce the mountain" (*Yevamot* 92a). Hashem does not simply forgive and forget; "One who says 'The Holy One, blessed be He, overlooks [our sins] is lenient,' his life will be forfeit" (*Baba Kama* 50a), and "his intestines will be overlooked (cease to function)" (*Jerusalem Talmud Betzah* 3:8). On the other, they tell us that the prayers and *mitzvot* of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur lead to an easy acquittal, or at least a reduced sentence.

Passing Tests

We can resolve this contradiction by understanding more about why specifically Rosh Hashanah was chosen as the Day of Judgment. It is very much to our benefit that we are judged on Rosh Hashanah, because this is the day

when Adam, the first man, was created (*Zohar*, vol. III, p. 100b; see *Shaar HaKavanot, Derushe Rosh Hashanah, Derush Alef*, p. 90c-d).¹⁹ Let us understand why.

The *Mekubalim* teach that the primary reason behind Creation is Hashem's desire to bestow good on His created beings; "It is the nature of one who is good to impart good" (*Derech Hashem*, part 1, chapters 2–3; *Daat Tevunot* 18; see *Etz Hayyim*, beginning of *Shaar HaKelalim*. See also Rav Saadya Gaon's *Emunot V'De'ot, Maamar Shelishi*). Hashem, Who is good in essence, wishes not only to bestow good, but to bestow perfect, undiminished good that the recipient enjoys to the greatest extent possible. This explains the structure of our world, with its constant challenges and innumerable hardships. All these make it difficult for us serve Hashem. As a result, our service is invaluable, and deserving of maximum reward. Through our Torah and *mitzvot*, we fulfill the purpose of Creation by

19. The sixth day of Creation fell on the first of Tishre.

making ourselves worthy of eternal reward. This is one side of the coin.

On the flip side, if we allow ourselves to fall prey to the *yetzer hara* (evil inclination) and succumb to temptation, we make ourselves liable to Divine punishment, G-d forbid. Hashem does not let the need for judgment slide by – ultimately, it is for our benefit. Our people, both as individuals and as a community, have endured much suffering throughout the millennia. This suffering is not meaningless, God forbid. It has a distinct purpose for the spiritual cleansing and rectification of both the individual and the nation as a whole. Overall, it is administered with mercy; Hashem will never replace His chosen people or allow them to be destroyed. He sustains us and even grants us spiritual and material greatness, because it is we who make His Name known in the world and fulfill His purpose in Creation. He tests us to uplift us, and punishes us to purify our souls, so that we can go on to receive His reward in full.

If we understand Hashem's Will and purpose, and the tests He places in our way, we will also understand that we will not be tried with tests

we cannot withstand. We are here in this world to exercise our Free Will, choosing good and shunning bad. If a test is truly beyond our capacity, then as far as that particular test is concerned, we no longer have Free Will – we cannot be judged or punished for our failure, because we could never have passed in any case. The evil inclination would like to convince us that the test at hand is too much for us, and we cannot be expected to resist it. This is a ruse; if Hashem put us there, we can prevail. Otherwise, we would not be there. The purpose of the test is the reward we can earn by passing it.

We can understand this concept with an everyday analogy. A father planned to test his children on their studies, and bought sweets to distribute to those who did well on the test. One child did not know the material, and did not earn his share of the sweets. Frustrated, he accused his father of buying the sweets for himself to begin with, not for the children at all... This was not only disrespectful, but also foolish. The father had no need for the sweets. He only wanted to give them to those of his children who earned the

treat. So too, Hashem is eager to bestow good on His children, and has no need to withhold it for His Own use. He wants us to succeed in passing the tests He gives us, just as the father wants his children to do well and enjoy what he prepared for them. He is not interested in making the test impossibly difficult – He helps us as soon as we make a move in the right direction, as we learn from numerous teachings of the Sages:

- “One who attempts to purify himself will be assisted” (*Shabbat* 104a; *Yoma* 38b and elsewhere).
- “The Holy One, blessed be He, says to Israel, My children, open for Me an opening of repentance as small as the head of a needle, and I will open for you an opening large enough for wagons to enter” (*Shir HaShirim Rabbah* 5:3).
- “Man’s evil inclination overpowers him every day and seeks to kill him...and if not for the Holy One, blessed be He, Who helps him, he could never overcome it” (*Sukkah* 52b).

Hashem does not want to administer punishment. It is His Will to dispense reward in

order to fulfill His purpose in Creation. Like the father in the parable, He desires only to give. The day when Hashem judges and decrees punishment is also the day that is the basis of reward. Clearly, then, even His punishment, should it be necessary, is geared toward giving – by cleansing us of our sins, it prepares us to receive reward. G-d's giving is the product not only of *Hesed*, but also of *Din*.

Hashem bestows blessing, plenty, and renewed life on the world in general and on man in particular, providing him with the means to continue to fulfill His Will. This explains why Rosh Hashanah is the most favorable day for man to be judged. The essence of Rosh Hashanah is man's creation as the only being able to fulfill Hashem's Will in Creation, by exercising his Free Will to do good. Far too often we fail, necessitating punishment. If this punishment were to be meted out full force, we would be lost, G-d forbid. This is why Hashem in His mercy judges us on Rosh Hashanah, precisely the day when man was created in order to receive reward.

Is the Day of Judgment strict and exacting, an occasion for trembling and trepidation? Yes,

without question – all Heavenly decrees, for life or for death, are determined on this day. But at the same time, Hashem also provides the means and opportunities for us to repent, so that we can be spared the severity and intensity of Divine punishment, and ultimately, receive reward. Our responsibility at this time is great; we alone can realize Hashem’s purpose in Creation by allowing Him to bestow good, so to speak. He waits for this especially on Rosh Hashanah, the day of man’s creation.

The Need to Confess

Because Hashem does not want to punish us harshly, He granted us a way to mitigate the force of Divine judgment. With this in mind, we can understand more about the concept of *viduy* (confession), which, as the Rambam teaches, is the basis of repentance (*Hilchot Teshuvah* 1:1). Our prayers and service of Hashem on Yom Kippur are centered on the confession of sins. *Viduy* on Yom Kippur has the unique capacity to subdue the evil inclination, sweeten Divine judgment, and awaken Divine mercy.

The *Viduy* recited on Yom Kippur is relevant to every Jew, even if it seems to us that we personally have not committed some of the sins listed. For one, even if we have not committed a given transgression ourselves, our actions may have caused another Jew to sin, so that we too are responsible for that transgression. In addition, our Sages equate certain types of behavior with severe transgressions like murder and idol worship (see *Baba Metzia* 59a; *Zohar*, vol. I, p. 27b). Also, in essence, all Jews are considered one body, and we are responsible for each other's actions. The sins of every individual Jew have a negative impact on the entire Jewish nation; even if we are not confessing our own deeds, we should confess on behalf of our fellow Jews. Finally, while we may not have committed a specific sin in this lifetime, we may have in a previous lifetime, and it is proper for us to confess for that transgression as well.

The Rambam writes, “Although repentance and pleading [for forgiveness] are always effective, in the ten days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur they are especially appropriate, and

they are accepted immediately, as it says, ‘Seek out Hashem while He can be found, call out to Him when He is close’ (*Yeshayahu* 55:6)... Yom Kippur is the time of repentance for all... It is the culmination of [the Ten Days of Repentance, when Hashem] pardons and forgives [the people of] Israel. Therefore, all are obligated to repent and confess on Yom Kippur.”

The Rambam goes on to list the five times we say *Viduy* on Yom Kippur: at night, in *Maariv*;²⁰ again in the daytime, in *Shaharit*, *Musaf*, and *Minhah*; and a last time in *Ne’ilah* (*Hilchot Teshuvah* 2:6–7).²¹ We

20. The Sages instituted an additional recitation of *Viduy* in *Minhah* on erev Yom Kippur, in case one chokes on his food at the *seudah hamafseket* eaten before the fast, and dies without having confessed his sins on the night of Yom Kippur (Rambam, *Hilchot Teshuvah* 2:7).

21. The Rambam does not include the *mitzvot* of individual repentance and confession in the laws of Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur, despite their obvious association with these days. This is because his arrangement of the laws in *Mishneh Torah* is based on the relevant Scriptural verses, and the Torah does not explicitly mention repentance and confession in our prayers in relation to Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, other than the *Kohen Gadol’s* general

see, then, that Yom Kippur is above all a day when we confess our sins, and through our confession, are granted atonement.

The five recitations of *Viduy* on Yom Kippur comprise a *shiur komah* (complete spiritual structure) that corresponds to the five worlds²² and the five levels of man's soul.²³ Every sin we commit blemishes the five worlds and the five levels of the soul, G-d forbid.

confession on behalf of the nation on Yom Kippur. (See below, "Preempting the Satan.") In his discussion of *Hilchot Teshuvah* (the Laws of Repentance) in general, he writes that these days are especially auspicious for repentance. The prayers for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, which include repentance and *Viduy*, were instituted by our Sages.

22. In ascending order they are *Olam HaAsiyah* (the physical world of earthly activity); *Olam HaYetzirah* (the World of the Angels); *Olam HaBeriyah* (the World of the Divine Throne); *Olam HaAtzilut* (the World in Which Hashem Reveals Himself); and an even higher world above *Atzilut*, that man is incapable of comprehending.

23. In ascending order they are *nefesh*-soul; *ruah*-spirit; *neshamah*-higher soul; *hayah*-living soul, and *yehidah*-unique soul.

A *mitzvah* has five components that contribute to its perfection and elevate it to a higher level, associated with a higher level of the soul. The most basic is *maaseh hamitzvah*, actual physical fulfillment of the *mitzvah* (*nefesh*). On progressively higher levels are *dibbur hamitzvah*, speech connected to the *mitzvah*, including study of its halachot and recitation of the related Torah verses (*ruah*); *kavanah*, intent to fulfill the *mitzvah* in order to obey the Will of the Creator (*neshamah*); *mahshavah*, keeping our thoughts focused solely on the *mitzvah* as we fulfill it (*hayah*); and *re'uta d'liba*, literally “the will of the heart,” the joy we take in fulfilling the *mitzvah* (*yehidah*).

In contrast, physical commission of a sin blemishes *nefesh*; failure to study the related halachot and recite the Torah verses blemishes *ruah*; lack of intent blemishes *neshamah*; lack of focused thought blemishes *hayah*; and lack of joy blemishes *yehidah*.

With every succeeding prayer on Yom Kippur, our repentance rises to a higher, more refined level, and with every recitation of *Viduy*, we annul

the corresponding *kelipah*.²⁴ In the merit of our sincere confession, we merit a lighter verdict, with only a few “dry bones” of punishment tossed to the Satan.

Confession on Rosh Hashanah

Confession is relevant not only to Yom Kippur, but also to Rosh Hashanah, the beginning of the Ten Days of Repentance. Based on Scriptural sources, it appears that we do not say *Viduy* on Rosh Hashanah. Rosh Hashanah is celebrated as a holiday, with festive meals and special clothing, to indicate that we are confident that Hashem will judge us favorably: “This day is holy for Hashem your G-d; do not mourn and do not weep... go eat rich foods and drink sweet [beverages]... for this day is holy to our Master. And do not be sad, for joy in Hashem is your strength” (*Nehemiah* 8:9–10). The *Shulhan Aruch* also rules that Rosh Hashanah is celebrated joyously, with festive meals (*Orah*

24. Each world and each level of the soul has a parallel evil force, in keeping with the principle, “G-d has made the one corresponding to the other” (*Kohelet* 7:14). See below, “Prophetic Preview.”

Hayyim 597:1; see my work *Amude Horaah, Moreh B'etzba* 9:2). In *Shaar HaKavanot* (p. 90a), the Arizal cites the *Zohar's* teaching that *Viduy* is not said on Rosh Hashanah (vol. II p. 186a).

And yet, it is clear elsewhere in the *Zohar* (vol. III, p. 231, also cited by the Arizal) that we should confess our sins not only on Yom Kippur, but on Rosh Hashanah as well. However, the confession on Rosh Hashanah is not public, like that of Yom Kippur; it is private and concealed, whispered quietly between sets of *shofar* blasts (see *Nehar Shalom*, p. 39a; *Amude Arazim*, *ibid.* 9). The main purpose of the *shofar* blasts is to stir us to repent. The sound of the *shofar* ascends to Heaven with our confession and repentance. Together, they have the power to sweeten Divine judgment and arouse Hashem's Attributes of Lovingkindness and Mercy.

Preempting the Satan

On a basic level, we confess in order to gain Divine mercy, as we learn from the verse, "One who covers up his sins will not succeed, but one who admits [them] and abandons [them],

Hashem will have compassion on him” (*Mishle* 28:13). On a more profound level, how does *Viduy* work to negate the prosecution put forth by the Satan and annul harsh decrees?

As we explained, confession effects a plea bargain in the Heavenly Court.²⁵ The Satan prepares to vilify the Jewish people with a comprehensive list of their year’s worth of sins. The Satan wants to see every last infraction punished to the maximum, which would result in an unbearable wave of harsh retribution. When the Jewish people immediately step in and confess these very same sins, the picture changes; the Satan has lost his chance to obtain the upper hand. A deal is reached in Heaven, but on much milder terms than the Satan demanded. There will be some punishment, because after all, there were sins – but it will not be as harsh or exacting.

This concept of a plea bargain is also the underlying reason for the *Azazel* sacrifice on Yom Kippur. After a goat was designated by lots for this unique sacrifice, the *Kohen Gadol* would rest

25. See above, “Confession in Court.”

his hands on its head and confess the sins of the entire Jewish people. An appointed messenger would bring the goat to a desolate spot in the desert and fling it over a cliff. When the goat was a pile of broken bones, the messenger declared, “So shall the sins of the House of Israel be erased” (*Vayikra* 16; *Zohar*, vol. III, p. 63b).

To say the least, this entire procedure seems very strange. On the surface, it appears to be no less than an offering to the Satan and his cohorts, the Forces of Evil that lurk in the desert. How could the Torah command such a practice (see *Rabbenu Behayye*, *Vayikra* 16:7; *Ramban*, *ibid.* 16:8)?

Oppressive Messengers

In *Tomer Devorah*, the Ramak elaborates on the *Zohar* concerning the *Azazel* sacrifice, drawing a comparison to the eventual punishment of the many nations who oppressed the Jews in a long series of exiles. He writes that when the Jewish people sinned,²⁶ they were handed over to

26. This may refer to Jews who began assimilating into Egyptian society. Those who did not repent died during

Pharaoh. Pharaoh did his job by oppressing them, bringing them to repentance. This is how the *Zohar* explains the words, “And Pharaoh came close” (*Shemot* 14:10). When the Jews reached the shores of the Dead Sea and saw Pharaoh hard on their heels, “they were very frightened, and the children of Israel screamed to Hashem.” By pursuing the Jews, Pharaoh caused them to turn to Hashem, bringing their hearts close to Him (*Zohar*, vol. I, p. 81b). Apparently, then, Pharaoh should not be deserving of punishment for his actions. In later generations, Haman, Sanheriv, and others of their ilk fulfilled a similar function. In essence, they served as messengers to bring the Jewish people back to Hashem, so it would seem that they too should be free of any blame. And yet, this is not the case. All those who oppressed and persecuted the Jewish people will be punished for their actions – including the Satan himself.

The Satan’s job is to instigate sin, and he has performed brilliantly for thousands of years. Why, then, do our Sages teach that in the future,

the Plague of Darkness.

the Holy One, blessed be He, will slaughter the evil inclination (*Sukkah* 52a)?²⁷ Why is the evil inclination at fault for carrying out his Divinely ordained mission? The Ramak answers this question in the context of the goat thrown to Azazel.

Sins do not go unpunished, not because Hashem desires revenge, but because they blemish the soul of the sinner. The suffering cleanses the soul, much like the pounding that bangs the dust out of a dirty carpet. However, there is harsh punishment that wreaks havoc in our lives and causes great suffering, and there is lighter punishment that serves its purpose without unbearable suffering. On Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur we pray that any suffering we endure will be of the milder variety. Repentance and confession, where we acknowledge our guilt and accept Hashem's judgment, gain us this lighter punishment. Even though our confession

27. The Satan and the evil inclination are one and the same: "He is the Satan, he is the evil inclination, he is the Angel of Death" (*Baba Batra* 16a; see Rashi, *Shabbat* 89a).

is only a very generalized, alphabetical list that does not cover one thousandth of what the Satan has to say, the acceptance of Hashem's judgment implicit in the confession has the power to sweeten Heavenly decrees.

After the *Kohen Gadol's* confession, the goat bore the sins of the nation (*Vayikra* 16:22). His confession and repentance procured a lighter sentence for the Jewish people, so that the Satan, who clamored for unforgiving, full-scale punishment, did not walk away with all he wanted. He received only a small portion, and even that was not handed to him on a silver platter; he got it in the undignified form of a few crushed bones, flung over a cliff. The Ramak compares it to a dog that grabs the dry bones left over from the king's banquet and runs off with them to its hole.

The Satan, who so eagerly carries out the decrees against the Jewish people, is comparable to the worldly oppressors who will be punished for the suffering they inflicted on the Jews. This is why he too will eventually be slaughtered. Hashem loves His children, and will not tolerate the existence of those who harmed them. The Ramak derives this

principle from a number of halachot mentioned in the Torah. If a man sins with an animal, the animal is also killed, because it was the cause of this man's sin and punishment (*Vayikra* 20:15; see Rashi). The same is true of the stone used by the *bet din* to execute a sinner sentenced to *sekilah* (death by stoning), and the sword used for *hereg* (death by sword). After the execution is carried out these instruments are buried, because they brought death to a Jew (*Sanhedrin* 45b).

Prophetic Preview

The Ramak writes that we find allusion to the end awaiting the oppressors who persecuted the exiled Jews in the enormous statue shown to Nevuchadnezzar, king of Babylonia, in a dream interpreted by Daniel (*Daniel* 2:31–45). The statue had a head of gold, chest and arms of silver, and stomach and thighs of copper. The calves were iron, and the heels, part iron, part clay.

The different sections of the statue represent the rule of the series of kingdoms that would dominate the world, each in its turn (see Abarbanel, *Daniel* 2:41). First was Babylonia,

the golden head, followed by Persia and Media, the silver chest and arms. The copper stomach and thighs were their successors, the Greeks. The iron was symbolic of the great power of Rome. The clay, at the very bottom, can be explained as an allusion to Yishmael. In his dream, Nevuchadnezzar saw a small stone strike the statue. When it hit, the statue crumbled, section after section – first the head, then the chest and arms, the trunk, and finally, the feet.

The gradual disintegration of the statue represents our nation's history of exile. The Jews were subjugated by these mighty powers of the times, one after the other, to atone for their sins. In each subsequent exile there was a prevalent impure force that the Jewish people rectified through their Torah and *mitzvot* during their sojourn. Each in its own way, Babylonia, Persia, and Media were crassly pagan societies. In Greece, the prevailing evil was their highly sophisticated system of philosophy, with Aristotle as its foremost spokesman (see *Igrot HaRambam*, Rambam's Letter to Rabbi Shmuel Ibn Tibbon). We can suggest that in Rome, it was and still is

insatiable, uninhibited pleasure seeking. When the Jews keep away from the impurity of each succeeding exile and its culture, instead strengthening their attachment to Torah and *mitzvot*, they destroy that exile's *kelipah*; section by section, the statue crumbles. The statue's clay heels represent the final stage of exile, the final era leading up to the coming of *Mashiah*. Our Sages call this period *ikveta d'Meshihah*, "the heel of *Mashiah*" (see *Sotah* 49b).

On a profound level, the statue is symbolic of the principle taught by the Arizal based on the verse, "G-d has made the one corresponding to the other" (*Kohelet* 7:14). Purity and impurity are opposing forces that parallel one another (*Sefer HaGilgulim*, chapters 1–2). When purity declines because of our sins, the Forces of Impurity are empowered. The statue, with its limbs and organs, represents the *Adam d'Bliyaal*, the evil parallel of the *Adam d'Kedushah*. When the Temple was destroyed in retribution for the nation's sins, the impure forces of the *Adam d'Bliyaal* were given power to subjugate the Jews in a series of bitter exiles.

The Sages teach that all Jewish souls have their source in the original soul blown into Adam by Hashem (*Bereshit* 2:7; *Shaar HaGilgulim, Hakdamah* 11; *Nehar Shalom*, p. 9d–11b). The root of every Jewish soul comes from a different part of Adam – some are from his head, others from his neck, his heel, or another one of his limbs (*Tanhuma, Ki Tissa* 12). The Jewish souls that come down to the world in any given generation correspond to the *kelipah* that is dominant at the time – whether the head, shoulders, torso, or heels. “In every place that [the Jewish people] are exiled, the Divine Presence is with them” (*Megillah* 29a). Accompanied by the *Shechinah*, the Jewish people overcome the forces of evil in every land where they are dispersed, and move on to their next stop. Stage by stage, Hashem smashes the statue, representative of the fall of the nations, but that is not the end of the story. In the future it will be rebuilt, only to be totally obliterated, this time in one blow. The ancient nations, long gone, will be resurrected, in order to suffer complete annihilation in punishment for their brutality against the Jews.

It appears that in our times, we are witness to the initial fulfillment of this prophecy. Idolatry, even in its most literal sense, is making a comeback, with sophisticated, educated people building temples to idols and bowing down to statues. Philosophy in its many manifestations is popular today as well, with a wide range of ideas, often entirely evil and perverse, gaining legitimacy as accepted systems of belief and thought. Hedonism, the legacy of Rome, is everywhere. In our times, wickedness is not limited locally – if it is found in one country, it is everywhere. Ideologically, it seems that the statue is being rebuilt, readied for its final, crushing downfall.

It is true that suffering at the hands of a series of oppressors was decreed upon the Jewish people, and the nations acted as G-d's stick. Yet they are deserving of punishment, because they were not merely carrying out a mission. Of their own volition, they gleefully and sadistically murdered, tortured, and robbed Hashem's people far in excess of His decree, strictly for their own evil pleasure. As a result, they will be punished for it all. The same is true of their other function in relation

to the Jewish people. The non-Jewish nations and their appeal are part of the temptation to sin that the Jewish people contend with in this world. Because they so enthusiastically compelled and propelled the Jews to transgress, they will be held responsible for those sins and punished accordingly.

From Yom Kippur to Sukkot

Hashem, our King, is a merciful Father. He created the entire vast universe as a vehicle to shower us with His unending bounty. It is true that in order to receive the good He wishes to impart, our souls must undergo the cleansing of suffering in punishment for sins. But if only we turn to him in repentance and confess our transgressions He will administer the punishment with a very light hand, so to speak, so that we can continue to serve Him. The *Zohar* teaches that after the judgment of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we can go on to rejoice with Him in the protective shelter of the *sukkah*, safe and secure from the accusations of the Satan. This concept is alluded to in the verse (*Bereshit* 33:17), “And on

that day, Esav went back on his way to Se'ir, and Yaakov traveled to Sukkot, and he built a house for himself" (*Raaya Mehemana*, vol. III, p. 100b). In the merit of our repentance and confession on Yom Kippur, may we soon see the day when the troubles of our people reach their end with the coming of the Redeemer, speedily in our times, amen.



Maftir Yonah:



Far-reaching Repentance

Yonah on Yom Kippur

As Yom Kippur, the day of repentance and forgiveness, nears its conclusion and the time for *Ne'ilah* approaches, we read the Book of *Yonah*, the *Maftir* following the Torah reading for *Minhah* (see *Megillah* 31a). Why did our Sages institute the reading of *Yonah* at this special time? Clearly, the story of the prophet Yonah and his mission to the Assyrian capital of Nineveh carries an essential

message for this critical hour of the holiest day of the year.

The obvious reason for reading *Yonah* before *Minhah* on Yom Kippur relates to the significance of this day, when Hashem forgives the sins of the Jewish people. Yom Kippur only atones for those who sincerely repent with all their heart and soul. The harsh decrees in store for them are rescinded and their sins are forgiven. This is the message of the Book of *Yonah*, which teaches us the great power of repentance. Hashem does not want to punish us – He wants us to repent our wrongdoing and return to Him. When we do, He annuls even the most severe of looming Heavenly decrees.

But there is even more to the story of Yonah. Hashem instructed Yonah to go to the non-Jewish city of Nineveh and exhort its residents to repent their many sins. Instead of fulfilling his mission, Yonah attempted to flee by boat to Tarshish. A storm struck, endangering the ship, and Yonah was recognized as the cause. At his own request, he was tossed overboard. He was swallowed alive by a whale, which spit him up on dry land after

he prayed for salvation. Hashem again ordered Yonah to go to Nineveh, and this time he obeyed. All the people of Nineveh, from the king down, immediately responded to Yonah's rebuke with a massive wave of repentance. Hashem forgave them, much to Yonah's displeasure.

Yonah said, "This is why I fled to Tarshish in the first place, for I knew that You are a compassionate and merciful G-d, slow to anger, Who bestows great lovingkindness, and You would reconsider inflicting punishment. And now, Hashem, please take my soul from me, for my death is preferable to my life" (*Yonah* 4:2-3). The fact that Hashem had been so forgiving and compassionate to Nineveh greatly disturbed Yonah, to the point where he wanted to die.

Hashem responded, "Did it distress you well and good (*hetev*)?" This Divine query can also be understood as, "Is your anger over the repentance and salvation of Nineveh good (*tov*)?" Is it justified and proper?

With his mission completed, Yonah left Nineveh and went to sit outside the city limits, where he

could observe the unfolding of events. Out in the scorching sun, Yonah was very pleased when a *kikayon* plant sprung up at his side, providing him with most welcome shade. When the following day dawned, a worm ate away at the plant's roots. It shriveled up and died, leaving Yonah exposed to the intense heat. He was so distressed that he again wished he could die.

The *kikayon* was a means of showing Yonah that his anger was misplaced. This plant had sheltered him for only one day, but when it died, Yonah was totally broken. Hashem rebuked him, drawing a parallel to his sorrow over the loss of the *kikayon*: “You had compassion for the *kikayon* that you did not labor for and did not raise, which came into existence overnight and was gone overnight. Should I not have compassion for Nineveh, the great city with well over one hundred and twenty thousand people, who do not know their right from their left, and many animals?” (*Yonah* 4:10–11).

Yonah's story raises a number of questions. Why was he so very unwilling to carry out Hashem's mission in Nineveh, choosing instead to run away

from Hashem? And once he did finally go, why was he angry when the people repented and were forgiven? Shouldn't he have been happy to see that the Creator is forbearing and forgiving, even to the dregs of humanity?

The final exchange between Hashem and Yonah is also surprising. Why did Yonah need the elaborate analogy of the short-lived *kikayon* to teach him that Hashem has compassion on all His creations? Surely Yonah should have understood on his own that Hashem would have mercy on an entire city full of people and animals, and want them to repent and be spared.

By Comparison

Let us try to understand the motivations behind Yonah's perplexing behavior.

Our Sages teach that Yonah wanted to avoid rebuking the people of Nineveh for two reasons. First, he wanted no part of a situation that would reflect badly on the Jewish people. The Sages say that Yonah made his own calculations: "I know that the non-Jewish nations are near to repentance. If

I carry out [Hashem's] mission, they will repent at once. The Holy One, blessed be He, is slow to anger and bestows great lovingkindness. When they repent, He will immediately have mercy [on them]... The anger of the Holy One, blessed be He, will [then] be [directed at] the people of Israel. And [He] will say, these nations, to whom I did not give statutes and laws, when I issue a decree upon them and they know about it, they repent at once. Not so Israel: whenever I send them My prophets, they are [stubborn and] stiff-necked" (*Tanhuma, Vayikra 8*).

Yonah's assumptions were correct; as soon as he reached Nineveh and issued his warning, the city's residents quickly took action. Not only were the people themselves, from sovereign to slaves, caught up in the great campaign to repent; even their animals were included in the fasting and affliction. Hashem saw their repentance, and the Heavenly decree against Nineveh was annulled.

This turn of events would seem to be a major condemnation of the Jewish people, who did *not* repent as soon as their prophets dispensed words of rebuke. Yonah was disturbed that Hashem

had forgiven Nineveh, specifically because their prompt repentance was a serious charge against the Jews. This eventuality was one of the reasons he had not wanted to go to Nineveh to begin with.

Quick and Easy

In addition, Yonah had another cause for concern: he was afraid that the relatively quick and easy process of Nineveh's repentance and forgiveness would ultimately prove to be a stumbling block for the Jews. Our Sages teach that the non-Jewish nations are "near to repentance" (*Tanhuma* *ibid.*) With just a bit of prodding, Nineveh quickly turned around. Yonah feared that after seeing Nineveh, even the Jews would think it was very easy to transgress and then achieve atonement, making it all too tempting for them to say, "I will sin, and later on I will repent" (see *Yoma* 85b).

The term "near to repentance" also implies that the repentance of the non-Jewish nations is limited strictly to the near future. It lasts for the short term, but not for the more distant

long term. It has no real, enduring effect, and the penitents soon revert to their former sinful ways. Their sole concern is to avert disaster, no more – everlasting piety and virtue are not on the agenda. This is precisely what happened to the people of Nineveh. According to some Sages, their grand repentance held out for a total of forty days. After that they returned to their old sins full force, becoming even worse than they had been before (*Yalkut Shimoni, Yonah*, chapter 3, 550; see also *Pirke D’Rabbi Eliezer*, chapter 43).

Yonah felt that if he prophesied to Nineveh, he would bear the responsibility for the outcome. Because their repentance would be prompted by prophetic rebuke, it would be viewed as legitimate. He feared that the Jews would then feel justified in imitating Nineveh’s shortcut repentance, without improving their ways on a meaningful, permanent basis.

The Impact of Sin

We can understand our Sages’ teaching that the non-Jewish nations are “near to repentance” on

a more profound level as well, based on a well-known Kabbalistic principle.

The Sages teach, *da mah le'maaleh mimcha*, "Know what is above you" (Avot 2:1). Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin writes that this can also mean, "Be aware that whatever is above (*le'malah*), is from you (*mimcha*)."¹ Whatever takes place, even in the higher spiritual worlds, is the result of man's actions in this world (*Nefesh HaHayyim*, *Shaar Alef*, chapter 4, note; *Ruah Hayyim*, Avot 2:1).

He explains further that a Jew should never take the attitude that he is insignificant, and that his actions have no repercussions (*Zohar*, vol. III, p. 168b, 169a; *Shaar Ruah HaKodesh*, p. 1a). We always need to know that every last detail of our deeds, speech, and even thoughts do not just evaporate and disappear; our actions have an impact in the loftiest of higher spiritual worlds. If we are wise, he writes, our hearts will tremble at the realization that our smallest transgression causes greater damage in the higher spiritual worlds than the wicked deeds of Nevuchadnezzar and Titus, destroyers of the two Temples. These evil men had no Jewish soul, and no source in the

spiritual worlds. As such, their terrible wickedness was confined to this world – it had no impact in the higher spiritual worlds, and on their own, they could never have brought about the Destruction. By the time Nevuchadnezzar and Titus set torch to the Temple it was all over, so to speak. The sins committed by the Jewish people in this world had ascended to the Heavens and destroyed the spiritual Temple on High, which parallels the earthly Temple in our world. The Temple had already lost its spiritual base, and could not exist physically without it. In the words of the Sages, “[Nevuchadnezzar and Titus] ground flour that was already ground.” The Temple was no longer like grain, still to be ground. It was flour; there was nothing further to do (*Sanhedrin* 96b, Rashi). The barbarity of the Babylonians and Romans only finished off the sticks and stones of the material Temple on earth. It was the sins of the Jewish people that had wrought the real destruction (*Nefesh HaHayyim*, *Shaar Alef*, chapter 4, explaining *Tehillim* 74:5; *Shaar Alef*, chapters 12–14).

Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin teaches us that the sins committed by a Jew are a powerful destructive force. In our world, they are the cause of illness, trouble, and sorrow for our Jewish brethren, because “All the people of Israel are connected with one another” (*Shevuot* 39a). In the higher spiritual worlds these sins cause serious damage, and inhibit the flow of Divine influx to these worlds, and from there down to our physical world.

Based on this concept, he goes on to explain our Sages’ teaching, “If you have neglected Torah, you will have many distractions facing you” (*Avot* 4:10). These words can be understood to mean “If you were idle from studying Torah and fulfilling *mitzvot*, there will be many others correspondingly idle because of you,” a reference to the Heavenly Hosts. When we fulfill the Torah and do the Will of the Creator, our good deeds mobilize multitudes of angels, who convey each *mitzvah* we fulfill to its elevated spiritual source. The *mitzvah* rectifies and perfects the higher spiritual worlds. In return, Hashem sends down the Divine blessing and bounty that correspond to

the specific *mitzvah*'s spiritual source. It descends to the angels, who then distribute it to the lower worlds.

However, if we were lazy and neglected Torah and *mitzvot*, “there will be many others correspondingly idle because of [us].” Our inaction prevents innumerable angels from carrying out their tasks, halting the building of the higher spiritual worlds and withholding Divine blessing and abundance from the lower worlds. Man is compared to “A ladder standing on earth and its head reaching to the Heavens, and behold, angels of G-d are ascending and descending on it (*bo*)” (*Bereshit* 28:12). The word *bo* can also be translated as “on him,” meaning “on Yaakov.” The souls of the Jewish people, implied by the term “Yaakov,” are the spiritual ladder on which the angels ascend and descend (*Nefesh HaHayyim, Shaar Alef*, chapter 4, note; chapters 7, 11).

The Covenant

We find allusion to the unique spiritual greatness of the Jewish people, and the ability they were granted to have an impact on all the created

worlds, in the renewed covenant between Hashem and the Jewish people in *Parashat Nitzavim*. The Sages teach that the covenant was made in order to establish mutual responsibility and accountability (*arvut*) among the Jewish people (*Tanhuma, Nitzavim 2*). All Jewish souls were originally part of the great soul of Adam (*Shaar HaGilgulim, Hakdamah 11; Nehar Shalom, pp. 9d–11b*). As components of a single soul, they form one united entity; one individual's actions, good or bad, have an impact on all Jews. The covenant was also a promise that the Jewish people would continue to exist as Hashem's chosen nation for all time (*Rabbenu Behayye, Devarim 29:15*).

We can also suggest that there was another aspect to the covenant: "In order to uplift and establish you today as His people. And He will be for you a G-d, as He spoke to you and as He swore to your fathers, Avraham, Yitzhak, and Yaakov" (*ibid. 29:12*). With this covenant, Hashem raised the Jewish people to a lofty level unequalled by any other nation. Their actions, words, and thoughts would all ascend to their spiritual source and have the power to affect the Higher Worlds, for good,

or G-d forbid, for bad. In the terminology of our Forefather Yaakov's dream, the Jewish people are the ladder that would stand "on earth," in the physical world, while their head, a reference to the spiritual soul, would reach "to the Heavens."

The opening verse of *Parashat Nitzavim* alludes to this concept with the words, "You all stand today facing Hashem your G-d" (*Devarim* 29:9). We, the Jewish people constantly stand "facing Hashem" – our every action on earth is reflected by the Almighty, as it were. We can explain the verse, "Like water from face to face, so is the heart of one man to another" (*Mishle* 27:19) in this context. Water mirrors the face we show it, and in a more profound sense, Hashem's behavior to us mirrors the "face" we show Him. When we do *mitzvot*, we cause greater revelation of Hashem's Presence (*Shechinah*) in the world. If we sin, G-d forbid, we push the *Shechinah* away, causing a spiritual void in the world known as *hester panim*, literally "concealment of [Hashem's] face" (see *Nefesh HaHayyim, Shaar Alef*, chapter 7).

This profound concept is also expressed in the verse, "Hashem is your shadow" (*Tehillim*

121:5). Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin explains that our shadow mimics our movements; whether we sit, stand, or extend an arm or leg, our shadow moves along with us. Like a “shadow,” Hashem sets the higher spiritual worlds in motion based on our actions in this world (*Nefesh HaHayyim* *ibid.*, citing *Zohar*, vol. II, p. 184b). The state of all the worlds depends on us and our deeds. Good deeds bring the worlds closer to rectification, and bad deeds blemish and defile them, G-d forbid.

With this in mind, we can also understand the continuation of the verses concerning the covenant: “What is hidden is for Hashem our G-d, and what is revealed is for us and our children forever” (29:28). Every *mitzvah* we fulfill serves as a unique connecting link, or covenant, with our Creator. This verse refers to the two aspects of every *mitzvah*: the hidden and the revealed. “What is hidden is for Hashem our G-d” alludes to the rectification in the Higher Worlds brought about by our deeds in this world, which we obviously cannot see; it is known only to Hashem. What we do see – “what is revealed is for us and our children forever” – is the impact of our

actions in this world, where the outcome is clear and obvious. When we fulfill *mitzvot*, we are showered with Divine bounty and blessing. Our sins have the opposite effect, causing suffering and sorrow, and the cessation of the flow of Divine bounty.

The ongoing connection between a Jew and His Creator forged by this sacred covenant will never be broken. We stand facing G-d forever. We are His chosen people, endowed with the power and the responsibility to bring His world to perfection through our deeds. This is the essence of a Jew.

The covenant is for all time, and it includes every Jew. The Arizal teaches that no Jewish soul, not even the most sinful, will be permanently cut off from Hashem – they will all exist for eternity (see II *Shmuel* 14:14). Ultimately, every soul will pay the debts it has incurred by sin, ideally through repentance, but if not, then through the cleansing process of suffering or through *gilgul* (reincarnation), atoning for sins committed in a previous lifetime.

Limited Range

Now we can understand why the Sages say that the nations are “near to repentance.” They have no mutual responsibility for one another (*arvut*), and no obligation to rectify Creation. Their sins have no impact in this world or the higher spiritual worlds, beyond violating Hashem’s Will with the actual sin – their deeds, positive or negative, do not have the same consequences as those of the Jewish people. The greater the harm a transgression causes, the more it takes to correct it. Because the non-Jews’ connection to the world and the ramifications of their sins are so limited, repentance comes to them more easily.

A Jew, who has a special covenant with Hashem, is on a different spiritual level. When he sins, G-d forbid, the situation is much more complex. His transgression does not begin and end with what he did in this world. It wreaks havoc in the higher spiritual worlds, and his repentance must repair what he has damaged there as well. This is not repentance on the simple level employed by other nations.

This explains why Yonah was so opposed to going to rebuke the people of Nineveh: he was afraid of the trouble for the Jewish people that might result. They would hear of the events in Nineveh, and apply them to their own situation. The people of Nineveh were entrenched sinners of the worst kind (see *Yalkut Shimoni, Yonah*, chapter 3, 550; *Pirke D'Rabbi Eliezer*, chapter 43). And yet, all they had to do was invest some time in prayer and fasting, and everything was cleared up with comparative ease. This type of repentance was effective for non-Jews, whose sins do not have a far-reaching spiritual impact. It would not suffice for the Jewish people, whose repentance must compensate not only for themselves, but also for the vastness of the Higher Worlds defiled by their sins. Yonah was concerned that the Jews would not look beneath the surface, and would not understand that for them, this could not be enough.

Truly Close

We see that as Jews, our deeds reach far beyond our own selves. As we said, on the one hand, our *mitzvot* perfect the world, bringing closer the

day when all mankind will recognize Hashem as the One King. On the other, our sins defile it. Our actions also have consequences for all our fellow Jews, to whom we are bound by an eternal covenant. The positive actions of an individual Jew are a source of blessing to all Jews, while one Jew's sinful behavior harms Jews everywhere.

With this in mind, we can understand the Torah's words following the declaration of the covenant in *Nitzavim*: "For this commandment that I command you today is not hidden from you, and it is not far away. It is not in the Heavens, for you to say, 'Who will go up to Heaven and bring it to us, so we may hear it and fulfill it?' And it is not across the sea, for you to say, 'Who will travel across the sea for us and bring it to us, so we may hear it and fulfill it?' For it is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart to fulfill it" (*Devarim* 30:11–14). In his commentary on these verses, the Ramban writes that "this commandment," always close and accessible to our people, is the *mitzvah* of *teshuvah* (repentance).

This raises an obvious question. Why would anyone imagine that repentance involves climbing

up to Heaven or crossing the sea? We can answer this question based on our understanding of the ramifications of our deeds, both in the higher spiritual worlds and in relation to our fellow Jews in this world. Knowing that our sins blemish the higher spiritual worlds, we might think that the only way to repair the damage is by going up to Heaven and personally making amends in the higher spiritual worlds.

In addition, we realize that our sins have harmed our Jewish brothers worldwide. As the Sages teach, when we fulfill a *mitzvah*, we tilt the Heavenly balance scale to the side of merit for the entire world. Unfortunately, if we transgress, the entire world will be weighed down by our sin (*Kiddushin* 40b; Rambam, *Hilchot Teshuvah* 3:4). Aware of the magnitude of our sins, we may feel that we need to travel the seven seas, seeking out those who have suffered because of our deeds and trying to make up for what we have done.²⁸

28. If our deeds have harmed others and we do not know exactly who was hurt, we should donate to projects that benefit the public (*Betzah* 29a).

The Torah tells us that this is not the way to do *teshuvah*. *Teshuvah* “is not hidden from you” – it is not concealed from us in the distant Heavens. Nor is it “far away,” at the ends of the earth. It “is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart to do it.”

We learn from the Rambam that *teshuvah* truly involves the mouth and the heart. To achieve complete, perfect repentance, we must confess our sins in words, with our mouths, and deeply, sincerely regret them in our hearts (*Hilchot Teshuvah* 2:2). This *teshuvah* has the power to repair the Higher Worlds and alleviate the suffering of those who were affected by our transgressions.

A non-Jew can say “from now on I will be good,” and he has repented. A Jew must do much more. His repentance needs to reach the higher spiritual worlds and his Jewish brothers around the globe, with sincere confession, regret, and commitment to change.

Free Will

It would appear that generally speaking, if a non-Jew does not repent, he is punished for his sins both while he is alive in this world, and also after death. A non-Jew who made a constructive contribution to mankind, for example in the field of medicine or philanthropy, will be rewarded for his good deeds in this world. If he helped the Jewish people or an individual Jew, or saved Jewish lives, he is rewarded in this world, and will receive reduced punishment for his sins after death. He does not have an actual share in the World to Come, because he lacks a G-dly soul.

A non-Jew is obligated to keep the seven Noahide Laws. If he chooses to do so, he elevates himself to the status of “righteous gentile,” and he is rewarded in this world. He is also granted an eternal soul suited to his status, so he can receive reward in the World to Come as well. A non-Jew who transgresses these laws is punished in this world and also after death.

A non-Jew can also go on to an even higher level by accepting the commandments of the Torah,

converting and becoming a Jew. In this regard he has Free Will, and can choose to avail himself of these options.²⁹

The *Shomer Emunim* (*Vikuah Sheni*, from 81 on) discusses the way Hashem relates to His created beings. The three lower levels of Creation – *domem*, inanimate objects; *tzomeah*, plant life; and *hai*, living creatures³⁰ – have only *hashgahah kelalit* – an overall, but not individual, form of supervision that extends to the continued existence of the species in general. The Jewish people, on the other hand, enjoy *hashgahah pratit*, ongoing individual Divine providence encompassing literally every aspect and every moment of each Jew’s life; “Man will not bang his finger in this world unless it is so decreed

29. See Rambam, *Hilchot Teshuvah* 3:5 and *Hilchot Melachim* 8:10–11; *Derech Hashem*, part 2, chapter 4. See also *Responsa VaYashav HaYam*, vol. III, 38, where this topic is discussed at length.

30. In ascending order, the four levels of Creation are *domem*, inanimate objects; *tzomeah*, plant life; *hai*, living creatures; and *medaber*, human beings with the power of speech.

in Heaven” (*Hullin* 7b). Both for good and for bad, nothing will happen to a Jew if it is not his personally designated lot, and was not specifically decreed for him in Heaven.

The *Shomer Emunim* also discusses another type of *hashgahah pratit*: individual Divine providence over nations other than the Jewish people, or other created beings, granted for purposes directly related to the Jews.

The nations function as a stick in Hashem’s Hand, used to castigate the Jews when they sin. When the Jewish people disobey Hashem, the nations are given the power to harm them. Hashem may elevate a non-Jew to a position of power and influence, in order for him to serve as His “stick.” Obvious examples are Haman, or in more recent times, Hitler, may their names be blotted out. On the other hand, a non-Jew’s rise to prominence may be intended as a means for him to aid the Jews, like Koresh, the Persian monarch who allowed the Jewish people to return to the Holy Land and rebuild the Temple. Hashem’s direct involvement in their lives and careers is not due to their own personal importance, but because of

the role they are destined to play in the affairs of the Jews.

The same can be true even of an animal, or any other living creature. Hashem may set it up in a particular place at a particular time, whether for the benefit or the punishment of a Jew or Jews. An animal has no Free Will; it will only attack man if Hashem has so decreed.

We learn this principle from Reuven's plan to save Yosef from his brothers. When Yosef turned up to meet them in Dotan they said, "And now let us kill him, and we will throw him in one of the pits." Reuven protested, saying, "'Do not spill blood. Throw him into this pit in the desert and do not lay a hand upon him,' in order to save him from their hand" (*Bereshit* 37:20–21). The Ohr HaHayyim points out that practically speaking, Reuven's plan did not appear to be much better than that of the brothers. Our Sages say that there were snakes and scorpions in the pit Reuven recommended (*Shabbat* 22a), and these creatures would certainly kill Yosef. The Ohr HaHayyim explains that even if it was not actually decreed for Yosef to die, the brothers would be able to

exercise their Free Will and kill him – if Hashem allowed it to happen. The snakes and scorpions in the pit, on the other hand, would never kill a person unless Hashem specifically directed them to do so (see *Zohar*, vol. I, p.185a-b; vol. II, p. 68b, p. 268b). In other words, man acts on his own Free Will, but other created beings can only operate as directed by G-d.

The position of the Jewish people in Creation is unique. We have a G-dly soul and the Free Will to choose right from wrong, and we stand eternally before G-d, as we learn from the covenant in *Nitzavim*. Our deeds literally shape worlds, extending far beyond our immediate physical surroundings. This is why the superficial repentance of the city of Nineveh could not suffice for our people. Just as our *mitzvot* rectify the Higher Worlds, our repentance must be on the level to repair the damage caused by sin.

Learning from Nineveh

Yonah may have had positive intentions, but he failed to understand Hashem's deeper purpose in sending him to Nineveh. His mission was really

for the benefit of the Jewish people, and not to their detriment. Hashem wanted His nation to learn an important lesson from the repentance of Nineveh.

Hashem has endless ways to impose His Will. He could have frightened the people of Nineveh into repenting through miraculous signs, making it unmistakably clear that if they did not change their ways immediately, their end was imminent. They would have responded equally well to this form of “rebuke,” with no need for Yonah’s prophecy and reproof. And yet, this was not what Hashem chose to do, because it would have been repentance by force, not by choice. He sent Yonah to Nineveh in order to teach the Jewish people that if a sinner sincerely repents and changes his ways of his own volition, Hashem will treat him with mercy and compassion, and forgive him.

This was true even of the people of Nineveh, who were on a much lower spiritual level than the Jewish people. We see that the Book of Yonah equates them with their animals, using the phrase *ha’adam v’habehemah* – “man and beast” (*Yonah* 3:7–8). In the concluding verse of the book,

Hashem speaks of having compassion on Nineveh, a city “with well over one hundred and twenty thousand people... and many animals” (ibid. 4:11). The people of Nineveh had only a *nefesh bahamit* – the animalistic or base soul common to all living beings, but not the additional G-dly soul bestowed exclusively upon the Jewish people. Despite this, as soon as they repented, Hashem forgave them, because He has compassion on all His creations.

This also explains why Hashem brought the point home to Yonah specifically by means of a *kikayon* – a plant (*tzomeah*), on an even lower level than the living beings who inhabited Nineveh. Yonah himself had bemoaned the loss of a mere plant; surely Hashem would have mercy on a city full of human beings. And if Hashem’s mercy extended even to the sinful people of Nineveh, there could be no question that He would be merciful to His beloved children, the Jewish people who received His Torah and fulfill His Will.

A Jew’s repentance is infinitely more complex than that of Nineveh or any other nation. It has many facets and many levels, encompassing the individual and his G-dly soul; his responsibility

for the Jewish nation as a whole; and the higher spiritual worlds. It extends even to Hashem's relationship to all levels of Creation. Our repentance and good deeds bring about the ultimate rectification of all the worlds, when Hashem's Divine Light will fill the universe, and all mankind will recognize His true greatness. This is no simple undertaking, but if only we seek to return to Hashem, He will help us. The very same mercy He conferred on the corrupt citizens of Nineveh will be granted in abundance to His cherished nation, the people of Israel.
