

THE MIRACLE OF YOM KIPPUR

By Rabbi Moshe ben Asher, Ph.D. & Magidah Khulda bat Sarah

Which of the following causes us the most pain: the wrong we do directly to others and ourselves, or the emotional baggage from the spiritual alienation that follows our wrongdoing?

When we cheat others—whether we unfairly take their time, their affection, their rights, their property, or whatever—we too carry a share of the pain. Confirmation of that commonplace experience is found in the converse circumstances: when we freely give to others—whether of our time, affection, rights, property, or whatever—we too are beneficiaries of those gifts. And as ben Azzai, a second-century Palestinian scholar, said, “. . . One good deed [and one bad deed] draws another in its train. . . .” In effect, the predictable consequence of wrongdoing is doing wrong more readily.

So it's no surprise that when we fail to seek and find forgiveness (סליחה) throughout the year, the painful consequences of our wrongdoing pile up on us. Whether it's as obvious as selfishness or losing one's temper, or as subtle as cheating in business or professional practice—belittling others emotionally and psychologically or cutting corners morally and ethically—the least effect is to incrementally destroy the capacity for love and joy and contentment, not only in others, but in ourselves too.

To the extent that we fail to challenge and reconcile these damaged and damaging parts of ourselves, we come to be joyless, loveless, and perpetually discontented. The result is not only that we internalize a punishing self-concept, but also that we reify it. That is, we come to believe implicitly that the punishing person we have become is not a “human production,” not the result of our own choices and actions, which are subject to change, but permanently fixed, unchangeable, dehumanized if you will.

We've met many people who are so deeply mired in this spiritual rut, they're convinced that nothing short of a miracle can change the punishing quality of their lives.

Which brings us to Yom Kippur and the brief Torah reading from Numbers 29:7-11. It begins: “On the tenth day of the seventh month [Yom Kippur] there shall be a holy convocation for you, and you shall afflict yourselves [from the root ע-נ-ה, which also has the same meaning as צום, fasting]; you shall not do any work.” (Numbers 29:7) The next four verses specify the offerings that are to be brought to the Temple—to wit: *olah* (עולה), *chatat* (חטאת), and *mincha* (מנחה).

What purposes did these offerings serve, and what's their relevance to finding a remedy for the

spiritually painful consequences of our contemporary wrongdoing?

The *olah* or elevating offering expressed one's willingness to forsake moral indifference and inactivity and, instead, to energetically strive upwards to God in daily life. The offering, or the prayer we substitute for it, symbolizes our acceptance of the idea that goodness resulting from such striving is possible and essential. It reinforces our faith in the social progress that can be realized from our “doing and understanding” (נעשה ונשמע) God's will as revealed in the Torah.

The *chatat* or sin offering, brought for inadvertent wrongdoing (שגגה), represented an acknowledgment that, once achieved, maintaining moral clarity and commitment in practice is a constant challenge. So the *chatat* offering expressed one's rededication to holding the high ground of a day-to-day moral and spiritual existence.

The *chatat* offering was made for a particular cause, reflecting a sin committed by one person exclusively. Thus to have brought the *chatat* offering, or to articulate the prayer we substitute for it nowadays, one must be conscious of having fallen from that high ground. In ancient times the offering had no holy purpose in the hands of those who failed to acknowledge that they occupied other than the moral high ground; and, similarly, one's contemporary prayer under such conditions of moral blindness is reasonably described as mere lip service. If one makes this offering as wholehearted prayer, however, the effect is to reacquire one's moral self-determination, to reclaim the moral freedom of choice that is lost when we give ourselves over completely to our sensory and materialistic desires.

The *mincha* or gift offering expressed a willingness to trust in God for one's material existence. It didn't mandate abandoning personal responsibility for one's own material welfare, but that the responsibility was to be met by following the vision and path of Torah—always making observance of Torah the highest priority. With the *mincha* offering or prayer, we affirm our trust in God as the source of our material necessities and the guarantor of their righteous fulfillment in life. The assumption is that, although we're already near to God, we're prepared to take a final step of placing our material life under the purview of Torah. This step represents a transition from the view that the world provides material goods to sustain us, to the view that we are to use God's material gifts to sustain the world.

The tradition teaches us that if we come to synagogue on Yom Kippur prepared to dedicate ourselves to God and Torah in the same spirit appropriate to bringing the *olah*, *chatat*, and *mincha* offerings to the ancient Temple, a miracle awaits us. There's no doubt that this miracle doesn't come cheap, but the personal and communal struggle it entails attests all the more to its authenticity.

What exactly is the miracle of Yom Kippur?

To understand the miracle it's helpful to imagine what our lives would be like if the possibility of atonement did not exist, if we neither understood it theoretically nor practically. The idea that we can, once again, notwithstanding our wrongdoing, purify ourselves and be at one with Mikvah Yisrael—מִקְוַה יִשְׂרָאֵל, the “(Purifying) Fount of Israel,” another name of God—is not inherent in human biology. We have no reason to believe that the benefits of atonement and forgiveness existed in the ancient world prior to Mattan Torah, the giving and receiving of the Torah at Mount Sinai and the teaching of it during the centuries that followed.

To imagine the absence of atonement, we have only to consider the inevitable drastic cause-and-effect consequences of wrongdoing without forgiveness. We have already pointed to the psychological, emotional, and spiritual baggage that inevitably saps our power to sustain ourselves both internally and in the external world. The more devastating effects are most apparent in instances of egregious wrongdoing, such as murder and manslaughter; but all unforgiven wrongdoing has similar if less obvious consequences:

As Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch (1808-1888) explains, the ritual practices of ceasing to work (שביתה מלאכה) and fasting (עינוי) on Yom Kippur remind us of the effects of losing the power to influence our existence that accompanies our failure to atone for past wrongdoing. Without atonement, bereft of the empowerment that it entails, the certain and compelling cause-and-effect consequences

of wrongdoing hasten our demise and death, both spiritual and physical.

The ultimate consequences of not atoning for our wrongdoing is suggested in the Torah verse that reads, “And you shall not profane [תחללי] my Holy Name. . . .” (Leviticus 22:32) ח-ל-ל is the root of the Hebrew word for “profane,” meaning to hollow out, empty, or make lifeless. In effect, by rejecting and refusing to be reconciled with God's Torah, thus continuing our wrongdoing and reinforcing our bad inclination, we replace God's will with our own, and we enervate God and the Torah, transforming them from a source of vision and inspiration into a “lifeless and powerless corpse.” (Hirsch commentary on Leviticus 22:32) In so doing, we not only undermine our own lives and, not uncommonly, the lives of those around us, disempowering ourselves, particularly our ability to promote justice and kindness, but we also desecrate and thereby vitiate the Name of God (חליל השם) among humankind.

Yet we can be reborn, completely renewed—most importantly, in our own eyes. Against all odds, we can come to believe in ourselves again as children of God, despite our persistent past wrongdoing, whatever its peculiar characteristics. The tendency of one bad deed drawing another in its train can be wiped out. The natural disempowering and deadly consequences of wrongdoing, usually so durable, can be erased. Our lives can be full of joy, love, and contentment.

As Rabbi Hirsch teaches us, Yom Kippur is a celebration of God's miracle that allows us to wipe out the destructive consequences of our misdeeds, through atonement (בפירה) and, thereby, to achieve spiritual, moral, and social rebirth, both within and beyond ourselves. (Hirsch commentary on Leviticus 16:23)

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