

Part 5: The special spiritual work of Yom Kipur

Yom Kipur is the ultimate opportunity for rebirth in the year. Starting a completely new, hopeful and pure future regardless of any past (mistakes, disappointments, failures, pain). Sounds almost too good to be true!

But the blessing of such a new beginning despite anything in the past is only possible in a reality that has wired into it a system for complete transformation.

On Rosh Hashana, instead of focusing on all the blessings we want for the year, we focused on choosing to live in a reality defined by G-d's vision which has *just that* kind of system built into it (details below). Powerfully choosing G-d's vision of reality on Rosh Hashana and rechoosing it again and again during the rest of the 10 days *is that* which allows for creating a new future on Yom Kipur.

Following is a tiny taste of this incredible system of transformation. Hopefully it will wet your appetite to learn more about it and apply it for the rest of the year.

Jewish wisdom points out the 3 channels for transformation that G-d wired into the universe: "Teshuva (return), Tefila (prayer) and Tzedaka (generosity) remove the harshness of the decree" Any aspect of life can be altered, even the harshness of a decree, through these channels. This is because investing sincerely in them can change us in a profound internal way (as opposed to external changes- like a new haircut, job, degree, apartment or relationship). As we change, the decrees coming to us can shift and change. Our goal in learning and using these 3 channels, of course, is so that this year we can fulfill more of G-d's vision for each of us, for our people and for humanity. We will touch upon them in reverse order: Tzedaka, Tefila and Teshuva.

5.1 Tzedaka (generosity)- As I choose to be more generous in my relationships with people (Tzedaka here refers to much more than just giving money- time, attention, warmth etc) I will transform. I want to ask myself- where is there room for me to be more generous with the people in my life- the very close ones as well as complete strangers. How do I want to conduct myself with others? We believe- "In the way you judge others, you will be judged" I want there to be compassion this year. What do I need to do about it?

I want to *remove the obstacles to having greater generosity towards others* and I will start by committing to give to a Jewish charity before Yom Kipur. ("Charity shall save one from death"). If there are relationships that need repair, I can undertake to restore and repair by going through the 4 steps of teshuva (see below). I can ask G-d: "Please open me to be more generous with the people in my life and help me correct that which needs correction".

5.2 Tefila (prayer)- As I choose to reach out to G-d with greater sincerity, I will transform. You don't have to be 100% sure that G-d exists to express a sincere prayer and change through it. Regardless of how connected I feel, since I can't control how I feel when I pray, all I need to do is to be real. Real with myself & my goals, Real with G-d. Even more important than saying every word in the prayerbook is speaking to G-d with my own words from the bottom of my heart. Since it is such a powerful pathway- learning more about it is strongly encouraged.

I want to *remove the obstacles to a greater connection to G-d* by making a sincere effort to be real in my prayers before and especially during Yom Kipur. I can ask G-d: "Please open me to reach out to You and be real in my prayers like never before"

5.3 Teshuva (Return)- This is my magical opportunity to edit my life choices retroactively!!! As I do this authentically, I am no longer the same person and I can reach an unbelievable level of purity and renewal.

I want as much as I can to take advantage of the incredible blessing of being able to repair mistakes and *remove the obstacles that are holding me back from being the most beautiful soul and noble person I can be and actualizing the mission I was brought to this world to accomplish.*

Many people can go through a year in which they don't damage others and do many good deeds- but are they using their blessings and resources to fulfill G-d's vision? Are they stretching BEYOND their comfort zone to move humanity towards its ultimate destination?

As part of our Teshuva we can express: "Please help me correct all that needs correction. Please help me transcend anything that is holding me back and know how to use all my blessings and resources to fulfill Your incredible vision for me, G-d."

Although generally on Jewish Holidays we engage and elevate the physical world (festive meals & clothes etc) on Yom Kipur we emphasize our connection to spirituality and refrain as much as possible from engaging in physicality. Observing the 5 prohibitions of Yom Kipur (fasting is the main one. The others are: not wearing leather shoes, no intimate relations, no washing and not anointing with creams etc) greatly impact our ability to do go beyond the limits of our body and do Teshuva. (see 4 steps below)

5.4 Teshuva- The Four Steps of Taking Responsibility for Your Life

This section is written by Rabbi H. Harris based on material from Rabbi M. Rottman

"The Hebrew word Teshuva, which is often translated as repentance, actually means to "return." Return to God. Return to alignment with our true self. Return to an authentic connection with others.

There are four steps of teshuva:

- 1) *Understand the mistake & the payoff*
- 2) *Regret – experience the cost*
- 3) *Verbal Admission- take responsibility - acknowledge the mistake and express regret, ask for forgiveness and declare a commitment for the future*
- 4) *Leave the negativity behind and make a commitment for the future*

Now let's explain the four steps:

1. Understand the mistake and the payoff

If you get angry at your mother, it's likely not going to be enough to say to yourself, "I shouldn't do that anymore." Typically, a person has a reason – a hidden payoff – for making the mistakes he makes. Unless he understands the hidden payoff behind his actions, he'll probably remain there. The payoff almost always has to do with being exempt from the responsibility of free will. For example:

A: "I'm furious at my mother and I let her have it. She makes me question myself so much every time she asks me about my career."

B: "She *makes* you feel that way? I think you're making her responsible for how you feel about yourself."

A: "Now why would I do that?"

B: "Simple. If your sense of self depends on what your mom/the world thinks of you, then who's responsible for your sense of self? Others! And what do you get? Exemption from responsibility! 'It's their fault!'"

The *Rema* reminds us in the first paragraph of his four volume code of Jewish law that if we aren't proactive in thinking about the responsibility we bear for our own lives, we will certainly assign that power to others. Adam and Eve were kicked out of the Garden *only* for not taking responsibility for their mistakes. The spies were decreed wandering and death only for seeking to exempt themselves from the responsibility of living in Israel.

A helpful formula for applying this is the following:

- 1) Describe the problem –
I feel _____ (negative emotion) surrounding _____ event/issue.
- 2) Describe your hidden payoff from having the negative emotion – i.e. the area of exemption from responsibility it's affording you.

EX. I have anger toward my mother for asking me about my career plans. My hidden payoff in that anger is to blame her for my feeling unfulfilled and thereby exempt myself from the responsibility of generating a satisfying career.

2.Regret – experience the cost.

What is regret and how is it different from guilt? Well, we all know what guilt is. That uneasy queasy feeling that we have done something terribly wrong that can never be fixed... But how is regret different? Here is an example of regret:

An eccentric but wealthy, elderly acquaintance tells you to meet him at 2:30 pm on Sunday afternoon at Starbucks for coffee. At 2:00 pm you are busy watching a great movie and decide not to show up to the 2:30 meeting. That evening you find out that this elderly gentleman made the 2:30 appointment with 10 people, you being one of the 10.

Only five out of 10 arrived at the meeting. To each of the five who showed up, your eccentric acquaintance gave a bank check for \$50,000 dollars. Now you know what regret is. The feeling of missed opportunity. When you find out that you missed out on 50 grand for a stupid movie, you feel regret, not guilt.

When we become aware that we went against the will of G-d, we betrayed our true self or we were hurtful and inauthentic with others, the feeling we are supposed to have is regret. What a lost opportunity! We lost a piece of eternity! And for what?

We need to get real with the cost. What price are we paying in life for the mistakes we're making? What's it getting us in return? (That's why Ethics of the Fathers says, "Calculate the reward of a mistake against its cost.")

3.Verbal Admission

The word in Hebrew, *vidui*, is the same root as the word *l'hodot*, to acknowledge or admit. When you admit to yourself, your Creator, and the person you transgressed against that you had given away free will responsibility and in fact you are responsible for your life, you thereby create the context for greater accountability going forward and you restore your relationship with your Creator, your self, and your fellow. Aside from the admission of responsibility (Step #1), you also verbalize Steps #2 and #4 as a means of demonstrating your overall commitment to change.

4. Leave the negativity behind and make a commitment for the future.

Imagine a drug addict who arrives at a rehab center for detox treatment. His parents leave him at the entrance and wish him luck after a tearful but hopeful goodbye. Little do they know that their addict son's suitcase is lined with enough cocaine to send a hippo to heaven.

It's not that our addict does not want to change. He really does! He just has not "let go" of the very things that have brought him to the negative state he is now in. Did you ever learn bad habits from a particular roommate and decide that you want to stop being like that? Did you ever try doing it without changing roommates? It's nearly impossible.

Declare your resolution to not make this mistake again. Then back it up with action. Do whatever it takes- be unstoppable in making sure you will not make that mistake in the future. This includes crafting your environment to prevent temptation and staying away from all of the paths that lead to that negativity, even mere thoughts, which can lead to the obvious next step -- action. And instead- reviewing the wisdom of Step #1 – the faulty logic of why you made the mistake in the first place. “ It is reasonable that you will need to recommit to this step again and again until a new spiritual habit is in place.

It is better to choose a few major items and do deeper teshuva, than go over many many items superficially

5.5 During Yom Kipur I want to **Choose my Neila commitment-** If I want this year to be different and better, I need to be different and better in some way. I want to commit to do something in the coming year that will bring me closer to G-d and closer to G-d’s vision for me.

This should preferably involve a mitzva because *mitzvos are the most powerful catalysts to affect permanent personal change.* It will have a more powerful effect if it’s a daily mitzva but most importantly, it should be specific and easy so that if I commit to it, I will *for sure* do it. It can be a very small *new* mitzva or a renewed commitment to a mitzvah I am already doing. It is advisable to check it with a mentor to make sure it is not too much. Remember to say that you take this on **WITHOUT A VOW** so that there won’t be negative spiritual consequences if you forget to do this. And even if you plan to do something daily, when you take on the Kabala at Neila, better to commit to once a week so that it will for sure happen.

5.6 *Just before the conclusion of Yom Kipur, at Neila, literally the locking of the gates of Heaven, we are facing the most crucial time of the entire 10 days – **the sealing of our judgment.** Our prayers and decisions at this time have more impact on our lives than any other time during the year.*

At the end of my personal Neila silent prayer, before the congregation goes over the repetition I pull out **3 lists**:

1. The RH list of my blessings and reminders of what life is all about and who I choose to define my reality and limitations.
2. My spiritual business plan of who I yearn to become in the context of G-d’s vision.
3. The YK Teshuva list – the choices and obstacles that I no longer want to be a part of me.

I present these lists to Hashem (G-d) and express my Neila commitment. I can ask Hashem to please help me fulfill this commitment and take me the rest of the way to His vision & my goals for the year. I don’t have to know exactly how this will happen.

Hashem Himself says: “Open for me an opening the size of the eye of a needle and I will open for you an opening the size of a banquet hall”. In addition, the Talmud states: ‘one who moves to purify himself, will receive heavenly assistance”

Part of my Rosh Hashana list:

1. **G-D, You have an incredible vision for all of humanity and for me. I want my life to be aligned with Your vision.**
2. **I want to recognize the blessings in my life and see the totality of the life You gave me, the pain and the joy, as an expression of Your love.**
3. **I want to transcend my greatest obstacles to fulfill Your vision for me.**
4. **I want to be a walking expression of the divine values You created me to bring to the world in order to fulfill Your vision.**
5. **I want all my resources from the coming year to be dedicated to fulfill Your vision for me.**
6. **G-D, I want to trust that You will take care of me. Always.**
7. **Hashem (G-D), I want the world to discover the truth and beauty of living according to Your vision.**
8. **I want to make You King by living myself more according to Your plan (Definition of reality and instructions for living).**
9. **I resolve that I want to be connected to You, Hashem (G-D), as the source of life.**
10. **I resolve that this moment is the dawn of a new era in my life for the good.**

Yom kipur -suggested prayer for the final neila prayer: **I stand before You, the Creator of the Universe, my loving Father, I look at the RH list and my business plan and of course I want to be connected to You as the source of all life, and be this beautiful person this year; then I look at the YK list and say- I definitely don't want any of the mistaken choices of the past to stand in the way. Please help me repair whatever needs fixing and help me be the pure and beautiful soul You created me to be. I want this year to be greater than any year I've ever had and I want to be a bigger person than I've ever been. Not just for my own sake but for the Jewish people and humanity. Please help me ask for the right things and help me understand Your loving answers**

I want today to be the dawn of a new era in my life. And to show to myself and to You, that I really want this, I'm taking on a spiritual commitment without a vow that will make me a better person and bring me closer to You and closer to fulfilling Your vision for me. This year I want to: _____

Hashem,(G-d), You know what I'm facing inside and outside, please help me succeed.

5.7 Rosh Hashana/ Yom Kipur Meditation- to be used anytime during the 10 days

(written together with Nicole Ellen, based on Rabbi Pliskin's book "my Father, My King")

Deep within your being is your soul, which is connected to the source of all truth, source of all love and the source of all blessings. The goal of this lesson is to help you connect to the spiritual opportunity of the days of awe from Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur so you can become a greater vessel to receive the bounty of blessings that G-d wants to shower us with, the greatest of which is a deeper relationship with Him.

Imagine a magnificent vision of a King sitting on his throne, on your way approaching the King there is a long narrow corridor that leads to the grand doors of the King's throne. Along the corridor you see reflections of your future, your soul power, your potential as a partner with G-d, the greatest contribution you can make to the world. You see what's possible for the whole world in choosing G-d's vision -peace, harmony, compassion, nobility, joy.... This represents Rosh Hashanah. As you continue your journey toward The King you see reflections of yourself making it real in the present through the small choices you make. You see yourself letting go of the things that hold you back so you can make room for being this person and receiving the abundance of blessings that are waiting to come to you in the year ahead. This represents the 10 days of awe. As you approach the end of the corridor allow yourself to imagine an hourglass. See all the obstacles such as anger, pain, frustration, disappointment, jealousy, despair and other negative emotions melting away, one by one, from the prayers, choices (and behaviors) you are making. This represents Yom Kippur. As you begin to let go and feel yourself opening up, see the grand doors of the King's throne opening for you. See all the space you cleared being filled with the abundance of blessings of the coming year. Envision yourself walking towards the Throne and two arms come towards you and embrace you, a deep, loving embrace.

Imagine that you are standing before the King's throne when the moment of judgment arrives; the sound of the heavenly shofar fills the grand hall. Imagine at that moment expressing to Hashem, your Father and your King a prayer from the deepest part of you.

Hashem, the Creator of the Universe, My loving Father, I stand before you as is every person in the whole world. You have a vision for the world that is greater than anything I can imagine. Please help us do what is needed to fulfill more of this vision than ever before. Open our eyes and hearts to choose to live in Your world this year more than ever.

Now imagine that the shofar sound is fading and you are now standing before Hashem as the palace gates are about to close and your judgment is about to be sealed. Imagine yourself turning to Hashem during these precious last moments and saying:

You know my heart and You know my potential, Please Hashem, help me repair and remove whatever stands in the way to becoming the pure and beautiful soul You created me to be. Please make today be a turning point in my life for the better. Please help me trust that You love me and that You will take care of me. Please bless me with the clarity to ask for the resources that will help me fulfill more of my divine mission of perfecting my soul, perfecting the world and coming closer to You. Hashem, no one truly understands my pain and my struggles, but You know what I'm facing inside and outside, please renew me and help me feel Your loving embrace every day of this new year. As the gates slowly close, imagine 2 arms reaching out to embrace you and hear your Father, your King, the Creator and Sustainer of the entire universe, saying to you: **know that you have always been and always will be in my embrace Please remember this when you most need it this year.**
