

Our Role vs. God's Role on Yom Kippur:

Yom Kippur can be a little formulaic. It can even feel a little magical in that sense. Eat no food, drink no water, don't wear leather shoes, use ointments, perfumes, or creams, or engage in marital intimacy. Then, say lots of words; such as, I have sinned, transgressed, erred, faltered, failed, been remiss etc. etc. Then we are forgiven. It's hard to believe that that works. Most things in Judaism don't work that way. How does Yom Kippur work? **God's role** is to wipe the slate clean, *כי ביום הזה יכפר עליכם לטהר אתכם מכל חטאתיכם לפני ה' תטהרו* - *For on this day, He will atone for you to purify you from all your sins before God you will be purified.* That's clear...but what's **our role**? To answer this, let's briefly explore two sources: (1) the story of the original Yom Kippur and (2) what the Torah itself says we should do, namely "afflict ourselves".

The original Yom Kippur comes at the end of very long process which begins on Shavuot. We receive the Torah at Sinai and it's super intimidating. We really can't handle it. The midrash says, we died. So Moshe goes up and spends 40 days on the mountain, then when he's ready to come down on the 17th of Tammuz. Hashem says "get out of here" *לך רד*; you're people have messed up; they are worshipping an idol. They're stiff necked people. I'm going to destroy them and start over with you. Moshe davens, goes down the mountain, breaks the luchot, spends another 40 days praying for Hashem's mercy and Hashem finally allows Moshe to *psol lecha shtei luchot avanim karishonim* – come back up and we'll make new luchot. Moshe spends 40 days and finally returns on Yom kippur with the 2nd set of luchot and the Jewish people fully atoned for. God will not only not destroy the Jewish people but has decided to give us another chance to live by His law. What did we do such to require this process? Why was God SO angry?

R' Shalom Schwadron, the 20th cen. "Maggid of Yerushalayim" provides an amazing insight. Hashem explains to Moshe that the people have sinned, egregiously, but that's not what makes Hashem prepared to destroy the nation, igniting this 80-day tension-filled limbo. In between the sin and the punishment there's a description, in pasuk 9, *וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל-מֹשֶׁה רְאִיתִלְ אֶת-הָעַם הַזֶּה וְהִנֵּה עַם-קָשֵׁה-עֲרָף הוּא, וְעַתָּה הִנֵּיחָה לִי וְיִחַר-אַפִּי בָהֶם וְאֶכְלֶם וְאֶעֱשֶׂה אוֹתוֹ לְגֹי גְדוֹל.* - *Hashem says to Moshe, 'I see this nation; and behold it is a stiff necked nation'* And only then... *וְעַתָּה הִנֵּיחָה לִי וְיִחַר-אַפִּי בָהֶם וְאֶכְלֶם וְאֶעֱשֶׂה אוֹתוֹ לְגֹי גְדוֹל.* - *And now I've decided, I am infuriated with them and I will destroy them; and I will make you [Moshe] into a great nation*

Rav Schwadron explains that Hashem can tolerate an error in calculation or fear, overreaction, selfishness, or unfettered desire, but afterwards, take responsibility. Be honest. But we weren't, we were *עַם-קָשֵׁה-עֲרָף* we held our ground, defended ourselves and rationalized. Aharon and Bnei Yisrael made excuses after excuses for their actions. This is familiar, it's human nature. Our children do it when we ask how the living room got so messy or who took out the snacks. We don't like to feel shame, to hang our head and admit a mistake. We dig in and if that means blaming others, we'll do it. Rav Schwadron explains. Adam and Chava could have eaten from the Eitz Hadaat - the tree of knowledge, and been honest, admitted their mistake and Hashem would have forgiven them and let them stay, but Adam didn't accept responsibility; he blamed Chava and Chava blamed the snake and here we are.

It's explicit in Jeremiah, Hashem says to the prophet Yirmiyahu, I can handle you making mistakes. You're human; I'm Hashem; I made you; I get it. But *הַנְּבִי גִשְׁפֹּט אוֹתוֹ עַל-אֲמָרָה לֹא חָטָאתִי* once you say "I'm innocent", "I didn't do it" or "this is allowed", or "people like me don't need to follow these types of mitzvot", that's when we will be brought to justice. The court just wants us to be honest and take responsibility. The trial doesn't begin if you plead guilty.

This is why the Rambam focuses so heavily on *Viduy* because saying "I did it" isn't some magic formula, it's how we fix our stiff-necked-ness by bowing our heads and admitting fault and responsibility for our actions.

Afflicting Ourselves: So why then do we need to suffer? Twice in Vayika we're told that Hashem wants us *וְעִנִּיתֶם אֶת-נַפְשֵׁיכֶם* - *to afflict ourselves* on Yom Kippur. Here, the Alshich (the 16th cen. student of R' Yosef

Caro from Tzfat) queries, God doesn't need us to fast. It's not like the lack of food or halitosis breath is 'enjoyed' by God. Furthermore, the Neviim make it clear (In Isa. 58) לָמָּה צַמְנוּ וְלֹא רֵאִיתָ עֲגִיבוֹ נַפְשׁוֹ וְלֹא תָדַע הוּא בְּיָוֶם – fasting alone accomplishes little to nothing if you go about your business and oppress others. Hashem is clear about wanting midot and teshuva as an internal, mental exercise (Isa. 55) יַעֲזֹב רִשְׁעֵךְ דְּרָכֶיךָ וְאִישׁ אֶנּוּן מִחֲשַׁבְתְּךָ וְיִשָּׁב אֱלֹהֵי' וְיִרְחַמְהוּ וְאֶל־אֱלֹקֵינוּ כִּי־יִרְבֶּה לְסֵלוֹת.

So, **what does fasting accomplish?** Why does the Torah say that we ought to afflict ourselves? The Alshich explains, fasting reminds us how fickle and feeble we are. Something happens to us when we're hungry. We confront our frail vulnerability. **When we are hungry, we are better positioned and primed to reach out to a Power that does not need a fuel every few hours. We realize that as much as we normally feel comfortable and stable, we are so dependent on so many things that God created and provides for us.**

This summer, I started watching a History channel show called Alone which sends survival-skills experts out into the wilderness to fend for themselves, all alone. The shows throws into clear focus how much we need: how easy it is to be hungry, dominated by the elements and how much we benefit from camaraderie and community. The spirituality is palpable and the language is often biblical. They speak about blessing and abundance; longing and humility. All without producers and instruction; (they film themselves). And these survival experts, one after another tap out – whether it's because of fear of predators, hunger, physical deterioration, exhaustion or psychological torment – they drop out.

Yom Kippur is kind of like a day of "alone". We take away all the amenities and are forced to reckon with how little we can do without them. It's not bad that we need these things. It's ok. **Yom Kippur – and specifically עֵינָיו – afflicting ourselves by abstention reminds us how much we need God and how good He must be for giving us all of these things we desperately need.**

So lets talk about **air conditioning**. In a way, it's good that the a/c isn't fixed this yom kippur. In a way it's good that we have to grapple with being downstairs. It reminds us how much we need each other, how appreciative we should be for the shul that requires so much to have the structure and services we do; for the incredible minds who invented a/c and the crucial partners who install and fix it; and to God for creating this world and giving us the ability and ingenuity to create such marvelously helpful creations of our own. We are in a far worse off place without it.

Similarly, we have a spiritual opportunity being outside. It reminds us that every breathe we take. The health and very lives that we have are a blessing from God, and that the Earth as a place where we can come to seek refuge and security is a blessing from God as well. All this is vulnerable in the sense that we are not powerful enough to control any of it. Only God is.

And this brings us full circle. We want things; we do things; we're impulsive and rebellious and we make mistakes. That's ok. Hashem can "carry" that burden. But we have to be honest. It's being stiff necked and defensive that induces the call to destroy. After sharing this thought with Café Europa a survivor added that we ought not be too hard on ourselves for being stiff-necked, for while it's not appropriate to rationalize and be defensive with God, that stiff-necked-ness has allowed us to endure and kept us from assimilating throughout the ages. It's a useful characteristic and coping strategy, we just ought not use it with God. **We have to level with God; say viduy – confess and take responsibility. Let's not pretend that we're exactly who we're supposed to be. Let's not bend over backwards to justify the things we've done to hurt others and the things we've done that defy our God. Let's admit. That's out job on Yom Kippur.**

Yom Kippur is about not pretending; we strip away the veneer of both self-reliance and self-rationalization. We do not have the virtue, the ability or the poise we project to the world or even in the mirror. (Like the *kikayon* at the end of Yonah), we are so vulnerable, so helpless, so human and that's ok. Today's the day, God is here to atone, forgive and purify.

(Kol Nidrei 5782, R' Ely Shestack – Cong. Ahavat Achim)