

## VAYELECH – YOM KIPPUR ATONEMENT

THE DEATH OF TZADDIKIM REMINDS US  
OF THE ATONEMENT OF YOM KIPPUR

In *Parashas Vayeilech*, Moshe Rabbeinu informs *Klal Yisrael* that he is about to take leave of the world. Chazal teach that “the death of *tzaddikim* (the righteous) is an atonement”. This was said regarding Miriam’s death as well, which atoned for the generation then. It was also said regarding the deaths of Nadav and Avihu.

On Yom Kippur, the Torah reading is about the deaths of Nadav and Avihu, and this is to remind us that just as the death of the *tzaddikim* is an atonement, so is Yom Kippur an atonement.

## THE ATONEMENT OF DEATH

Not only is the death of the *tzaddikim* an atonement for *Klal Yisrael*, but the death of any individual Jew is an atonement as well, for himself.

The Gemara says that there are four categories of sin, in varying levels of severity, with the more severe sins requiring more elements of *teshuvah*. Violating a positive commandment of the Torah requires just *teshuvah*, whereas violating a prohibition of the Torah requires *teshuvah* and suffering; sins that are of capital punishment in *Beis Din*, or sins that are *kares*<sup>1</sup>, requires the atonement of Yom Kippur in addition to *teshuvah* and suffering, whereas the sin of *chilul Hashem* (profaning the Name of Hashem) is not atoned for except through death, in addition to *teshuvah*, suffering, and Yom Kippur.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, Yom Kippur, the time of atonement, does not always atone for every possible situation. If a person in the times of the *Beis HaMikdash* committed certain sins that required him to bring a *korbon*<sup>3</sup>, he could not be atoned for unless he brought the *korbon*. Yom Kippur also does not atone for people who aren’t interested in doing *teshuvah*; “Yom Kippur atones only for those who return.” Yom Kippur also does not atone for sins committed between man and his friend, unless one has sought forgiveness from his friend beforehand. Yom Kippur also does not atone for the sin of *chilul Hashem*, as mentioned above.

The ultimate and essential kind of atonement is death. Death is the very core of atonement, and it contains a deeper kind of atonement than the atonement of Yom Kippur, as we can see from the fact that Yom Kippur alone does not atone for the sin of *chilul Hashem*, and it is only atoned for with death.

YOM KIPPUR – THE GATEWAY TO ATTAINING THE  
LEVEL OF “DEATH”

The simple understanding of this is because even when we are atoned for on Yom Kippur, this atonement is not completed yet, and there is still greater depth to uncover, which could be attained through death; after all, the only thing that atones for the sin of *chilul Hashem* is death, so death must be a deeper and more complete kind of atonement than Yom Kippur is.

But to have a clearer understanding of this matter, on Rosh HaShanah, it is written who will live and who will die, and on Yom Kippur this is sealed; the “books of life and death” are open in front of Hashem, which simply means who will live or die this year, but the deeper understanding of the “books of death” is not referring to physical death, but to attain an atonement on a level of “death”, which a person may access through Yom Kippur. Thus, Yom Kippur serves as the gateway to enter further into the atonement, and to attain the level of “death” - without having to actually die.

THE PURITY ON YOM KIPPUR: THE REMOVAL OF THE  
BARRIERS OF SIN

To explain this, Yom Kippur is a day in which we are cleansed from sin, it is a day of purity (“*For on this day, you will be purified*”), where the muck of sin is removed from us; the prophet refers to sin as “dirty clothing” upon us, and the atonement of Yom Kippur is essentially a removal of this “dirty clothing” from upon us, thereby cleansing us from sin and purifying us. That is essentially the “purity” which Yom Kippur brings upon us.

When the impurity of sin is removed from us, the barriers that were created between us and Hashem from the sin are removed, and “the iron wall that separates between Yisrael and their Father in Heaven” is torn; this was said of the destruction of the *Beis HaMikdash*, where a thick barrier was created

1 *kares*- “spiritual excision of the soul”

2 *Yoma* 86a

3 *sacrifice*

between us and Hashem afterwards, and it is also said of all sins in general, which creates a barrier between one and Hashem. Whenever a person feels that he is far away from Hashem, this feeling actually comes as a result of sin, which causes a person to feel distant from Hashem. But Yom Kippur comes and brings purity upon a person, in the sense that it removes these barriers created by sin.

Of the Ten Days of Repentance, it is said, "*Seek Hashem, where He is found*", implying that Hashem is closer in proximity to us, during these ten days. But on Yom Kippur, there is an even more special degree of closeness. The atonement and purity of Yom Kippur removes the sins from upon a person, and now there can be greater closeness between one and Hashem.

When sin is removed from a person, it is like laundering a soiled article of clothing - the more one washes it, the cleaner it will come out; so, too, the deeper *teshuvah* that a person does, the purer he becomes through the atonement of Yom Kippur, and he will attain a level of "*A pure heart You created me with*" to that degree. But the less a person did *teshuvah*, or the less earnest it is, although every level of *teshuvah* is accepted by Hashem, still, it is not "*teshuvah shelaimah*" (complete repentance), and it will not bring purity upon a person, unless a person has done true *teshuvah*.

#### TESHUVAH OF "BEFORE CREATION" & TESHUVAH OF "AFTER CREATION"

There are essentially two different levels of *teshuvah*: The power of *teshuvah* on the level of "before Creation", and the power of *teshuvah* on the level of "after Creation".

Chazal state that Hashem created *teshuvah* even before He created the world, and this is the power of *teshuvah* of "before Creation", which is a

deeper and more powerful kind of *teshuvah*, for it is from a dimension in which there was no possibility of sin yet. When a person uses the power of *teshuvah* of "before Creation", he is accessing the root of becoming a totally "new being", just as in the beginning state of Creation; this enables him to gain a "pure heart", enabling him to return to a state in which he not only repents from the sin, but that the sin is completely erased, for he has returned to the point of before the sin.

Doing *teshuvah* on a level of "after Creation" can also purify a person, but it cannot bring a person back to the original pure state as if the sin was never here before.

#### EARNEST TESHUVAH ON YOM KIPPUR RESULTS IN A GREATER SENSE OF FEELING HASHEM

Therefore, the deeper one's *teshuvah* is, the closer it is to "*teshuvah shelaimah*" (complete repentance), and in turn, the more barriers between him and Hashem are removed. Then he will feel strongly a palpable sense of Hashem's existence - which is the depth of the *neshamah* (the Divine soul) that can feel the reality of the Creator. The more earnest a person's *teshuvah* is, the more he removes the barriers created by sin, and he gains greater recognition of Hashem's existence.

This is the depth of what it means to "find" Hashem during the days of *teshuvah*. On Rosh HaShanah, a person can attain the first level of closeness with Hashem, and on Yom Kippur a person can find the deeper level of closeness. As we explained here, the level of Yom Kippur enables a person to remove the barriers created by sin, and the more earnest that a person's *teshuvah* is, the more the barriers are removed, and subsequently, the more a person will sense the presence of Hashem. But as we emphasized, it will depend on how much one has done

*teshuvah*; of how much purity he has attained.

If one indeed merits to do *teshuvah* from the depths of his heart, and he palpably feels Hashem more and more - when it is a true sense that he can feel, then, in the words of the *Mesillas Yesharim*, he will be "pulled after Hashem, like a magnet is drawn after iron, as it is written, "*Pull me after You, quickly.*" The nature of the soul is that it is pulled after its Source, Hashem. This is not an "*avodah*" (task), nor does it take exertion; rather, it is natural for the soul.

But as long as the barriers created by sin exist, a person will not feel this magnetic pull after Hashem, and it is like placing something in between the two magnets, or distancing the two magnets from each other, which will take away the pull.

The deeper of a level of purity that one attains on Yom Kippur, and the more he removes the barriers created by sin, not only will this cause a person to feel closer to Hashem, but he will feel a desire for this closeness, more than anything else that he wants, and it will feel blissful and pleasant.

#### BEING WILLING TO DIE FOR HASHEM

The deaths of Nadav and Avihu, which we read about on Yom Kippur, is to remind us that just as death of the righteous is an atonement, so is Yom Kippur an atonement. The holy *Ohr HaChaim* explained, at length, of a penetrating interpretation of the matter of the deaths of these two great *tzaddikim*. The *Ohr HaChaim* explained that Nadav and Avihu died a very blissful kind of death that resembled the "kiss of death" of Hashem, which only certain *tzaddikim* merit. They knew that in drawing close to Hashem in the *Kodesh Kodashim* that they would die in the process, but they were willing to die for this, because they wanted this

high level of closeness with Hashem, out of their great love for Him.<sup>4</sup>

This is really the depth of Yom Kippur. It is the time where the purity of our soul can come forth.

During the rest of the year, although our soul is always pure, for we state every day in the morning “*My G-d, a pure soul You gave to me*”, we do not always feel the purity of the soul. But on Yom Kippur, if one truly repents, he can reveal himself as a pure soul.

On Yom Kippur, we resemble the angels, by foregoing the needs of our physical body, and instead living a soul kind of life, on this day. That is the purity of Yom Kippur – to reveal the purity of our own soul. This is our own personal *avodah* of Yom Kippur. Once we reveal the purity of our soul, our soul will naturally be pulled after Hashem, and it will feel a pleasurable bliss in this newfound closeness with Hashem.

The desire to get closer to Hashem on Yom Kippur is the depth behind the matter of the four categories of atonement (*teshuvah*, suffering, Yom Kippur, and death). The sin of *chilul Hashem* can only be atoned through all four levels of atonement: *teshuvah*, suffering, Yom Kippur, and death. What, essentially, is the “atonement” achieved by death? On a general level, the death of *tzaddikim* atones, but on an individual level, the death of any person can atone for himself – and it can resemble the death of *tzaddikim*, such as the deaths of Nadav and Avihu, when they died amidst their desire to achieve greater closeness with Hashem. Their deaths became a means for them to reach the greater closeness with Hashem, and this is the depth of how “death atones”.

During the rest of the year, when we recite *Shema*, upon saying the word “*Echad*”, there is a [pious, non-obligatory] intention that one can have in mind of being willing to die *al kiddush Hashem* (in sanctification of Hashem’s Name). While most people today are not on the level of being consciously willing to die *al kiddush Hashem*, one can still contemplate it as he says *Shema*. It is not on our actual level, though, during the rest of the year, to be willing to die for Hashem. But there is one day of the year - Yom Kippur - where each of us can be on this level, of being willing to die for Hashem.

#### THE STEPS OF THE INNER AVODAH ON YOM KIPPUR

If one can feel the purity on Yom Kippur, he can then begin the true inner *avodah* of Yom Kippur.

The first step of the *avodah* is to truly do *teshuvah*, earnestly, from the depths of your heart, and only Hashem can testify what level a person has reached in his heart. If one has indeed done true *teshuvah*, he will surely feel a palpable closeness with Hashem as a result. If he doesn’t feel the closeness, it means that he hasn’t done complete *teshuvah*.

If you do feel the closeness on Yom Kippur, you have reached the first step, and the next step is to feel the pleasantness of this closeness, and then desire to get closer to it, and closer, and closer.

After that point, comes the true test, the point of *mesirus nefesh* (self-sacrifice), of being willing to give up your life for this. During the rest of the year, you may not be consciously willing to die for this closeness with Hashem. But on Yom Kippur, you can reach a point where you are willing to give

yourself up for this. You can now reach the point that Nadav and Avihu desired, of being willing to die, for more and more closeness with Hashem.

#### THE ULTIMATE TEST

If you reach that point, this will be your choice: Do you want to get closer and closer to Hashem - even if it will mean dying for it? Or do you want to return to the lowly world? What do you choose?

True, this is a level that most people cannot be on. Most people are not willing to die for more closeness with Hashem. But we see that even during the rest of the year, where we are nowhere near this level of *mesirus nefesh*, at least we have are able to have some kind of intention when reciting *Shema* that we are willing to have *mesirus nefesh*, to be willing to die for Hashem; and even if we don’t really mean it when we think about it, as long as we had tiny sliver of earnest intention for this as we said it, we have a greater chance of reaching this level on Yom Kippur, and to really want it.

If you are willing to die to reach more closeness with Hashem on Yom Kippur, this is like the atonement of death, which is the greatest level of atonement, which atones even for the most severe sin of all, the sin of *chilul Hashem*. But this entails a deep power of choice that you make on Yom Kippur, of what you really, really want.

#### THE DEPTHS OF THE HEART

On Yom Kippur, we are at the deepest level of closeness with Hashem we can reach. It is reached only in the very innermost depths of our heart, where our true power of choice lies. The external layer of our heart is where we seek atonement in order that we shouldn’t suffer, and so that we should



have *Gan Eden* and *Olam HaBa*, etc. But the depth of seeking atonement which we need to reveal is, that it should pain you, deeply, that there is a barrier between you and Hashem, which has been created from sin. That can spur you on to do true *teshuvah*, and that is where the true atonement lies.

Any of the other reasons of why we need atonement are also true (at least to some level), but on Yom Kippur, when we keep seeking atonement, through continuously the words "סלח לנו" "לנו, מחל לנו, כפר לנו", "Forgive us, pardon us, atone us", the inner intention of these words that we should ideally have is, that we want to be cleansed from sin, and not just to simply be forgiven, as we ask during the rest of the year in *Shemoneh Esrei*, in the blessing of "סלח לנו".

Every person will need to clarify to himself, internally, why he wants to be "forgiven" from Hashem. If it is because he wants to avoid being punished and because he wants to have spiritual success, then the words we are saying here are very far from him. But if a person seeks truth, and to live a truthful life, a life of closeness with Hashem, his main request for atonement on Yom Kippur is to desire more closeness with Hashem.

"My soul thirsts for G-d" – one can feel how distant he is from Hashem and it is painful to him, bitterer than death, and this is what he asks Hashem for, that the barriers be removed between him and Hashem. If that it his entire concern on Yom Kippur, then he attains a certain level of closeness already, and even if it is not the complete level, it is something worthy. When one is mainly concerned with this in his requests on Yom Kippur as he continuously says the words "סלח לנו, מחל לנו, כפר לנו", and if this

is what he desires in life, he is closer to doing "complete *teshuvah*", and he will feel the closeness with Hashem, and then he can know with certainty that his sins have been forgiven.

Chazal teach that if a person wants to know if his sins have been forgiven or not, he should try to sense afterwards (after doing *teshuvah*) if he feels closer to Hashem or not. If he feels closer to Hashem than before, it is a sign that his sins have been atoned.

If this is what a person wants in his life – to desire closeness with Hashem – he can then reach the level that is after the atonement of Yom Kippur, which is the atonement of death.

The atonement of "Yom Kippur" itself is an obligation upon every person to try to reach, by every person, no matter what level he is on; but in order to reach the higher level of atonement on Yom Kippur, of "death atones", which we read about on Yom Kippur when we read the deaths of Nadav and Avihu, we need to go deeper. Yom Kippur is the gateway that leads us to sensing a palpable closeness with Hashem, to reach a point in which we are willing to give our entire life for this – to reach closeness with Hashem.

We cannot live on this level during the rest of the year, for it is a very high level to stay on. But we can at least have one time of the year where we access it, on Yom Kippur, which is called the "day of *HaKadosh Baruch Hu*". It was the day where the *Kohen Gadol* entered before Hashem in the *Kodesh Kodashim*, and the *Nefesh HaChaim* explains that one can enter the *Kodesh Kodashim* on an inner level, in the depths of his own heart, resembling the *Kohen Gadol* who entered the *Kodesh Kodashim* on Yom Kippur.

This is at the innermost depths the heart. When one is willing to enter into this deep place, a person is faced with the ultimate choice: Are you prepared to go further into the atonement of Yom Kippur, by entering into the next step, of "death" – by being willing to give your life for this? If you can even touch upon this level, you are connecting to the depths of the *avodah* of this day.

### IN CONCLUSION

And so, the first step of the atonement on Yom Kippur is to do true *teshuvah* and to feel a greater sense of Hashem's Presence. This level is required by every person to reach. The step after this is a higher level, which not everyone reaches: to want this closeness with Hashem so much that you are willing to die for it, as Nadav and Avihu did.

May Hashem help us be clear about the goal of this day of Yom Kippur, to know clearly why exactly we seek to be forgiven and atoned. It shouldn't just be known to us on an intellectual level; rather, we should feel it in our heart, of why we really seek atonement.

May we merit that these requests to be forgiven and atoned should stem from our innermost depths, from a clear recognition and a true desire, to remove the barriers that have formed between us and Hashem, and to genuinely feel His closeness to us.

Then, may we all merit together to feel the Creator, to feel the pleasantness of sensing Hashem's existence, to be pulled after him like a magnetic pull, and may we be willing to give all our strength and all of our soul for this.