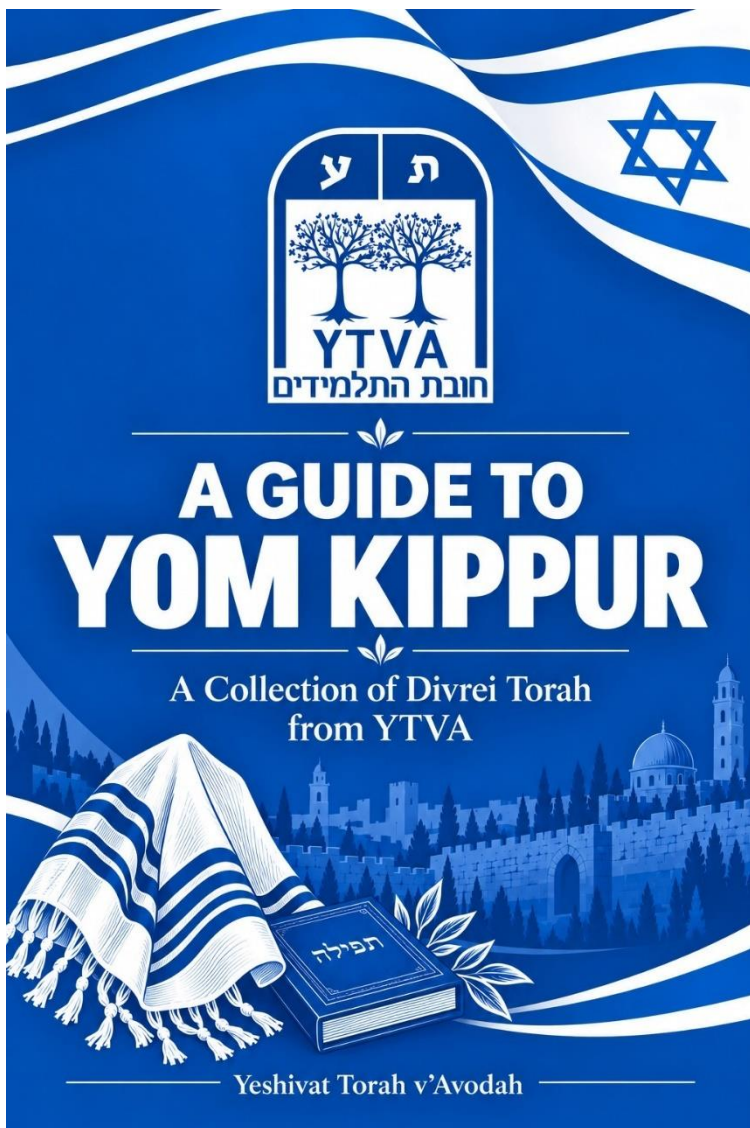




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Introduction

For many, Yom Kippur is one of the most meaningful days of the year. The ancient Jewish prayers and melodies awaken a longing for a deeper version of ourselves.

It is a day when we ask ourselves difficult questions: Am I proud of the way I acted in the past year? Are there things I regret doing? Who do I want to become in the upcoming year?

For a Jew, preparation for Yom Kippur is essential. It is vital that a person spends time studying divrei Torah that discuss and clarify the meaning behind the laws, customs and themes of Yom Kippur.

What intentions should I have as I enter into this holy day? What should I be thinking about during Kol Nidrei? How can I achieve forgiveness from God? And lastly, during the final minutes of Yom Kippur, as I am praying Neilah, what should be my mindset?

It is our hope that this collection of divrei Torah from YTVA can serve as a Guide to Yom Kippur.

Gemar Chatima Tova!

From Kol Nidrei to Shema: Rabbi Akiva and the Path from Ahavat Yisrael to Ahavat Hashem

Rabbi Shaul Feldman

The Opening and Closing of Yom Kippur

There is a striking structure to Yom Kippur. We begin the night by making room for the avaryanim, the transgressors, and we end Ne'ilah with the greatest declaration of yichud Hashem, the unity of God. The opening words are:

בְּיִשׁוּבָהּ נָשָׁל מַעֲלָה וּבְיִשׁוּבָהּ נָשָׁל מַטָּה, עַל דַּעַת הַמָּקוֹם וְעַל
דַּעַת הַקָּהָל, אָנוּ מִתְרִין לְהִתְפַּלֵּל עִם הָעֹבְרִים.

*In the heavenly court and in the earthly court, with the
consent of the Omnipresent and with the consent of the
congregation, we permit prayer with the transgressors.
(Yom Kippur Machzor, before Kol Nidrei)*

At the end of the day, after all the vidui, selichot, and
tefillot, we arrive at:

שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ ה' אֶחָד.

*"Hear, O Israel: Hashem is our God; Hashem is One"
(Deuteronomy 6:4; close of Ne'ilah).*

What is the connection between these two moments?
Why must the path to the highest level of ahavat Hashem
begin by admitting every Jew into the tzibbur?

A teaching transmitted in the name of Rav Kook gives us
the yesod. The avodah of Yom Kippur is meant to bring a

person to the true love of God expressed in the final Shema. Rav Kook teaches that the way to reach true ahavat Hashem is through ahavat Yisrael.

Rabbi Akiva Hidden at the Beginning

Before Kol Nidrei, we recite one more pasuk:

אֹרֶזְרֵעַ לְצַדִּיק וְלִישָׁרִי לֵב שְׂמַחָהּ.

"Light is sown for the righteous, and joy for the upright of heart" (Tehilim 97:11).

Rav Kook points out that the sofei teivot, the final letters, spell י, לצדיק from ק, זרוע from ע, אור from ר: עקיבה ר' from ב, ולישרי, and שמחה from ה. According to Rav Kook, Rabbi Akiva is thus hidden in the words with which we enter Yom Kippur. This is not merely a remez. Rabbi Akiva embodies both ends of the day's avodah: the highest ahavat Hashem and the deepest ahavat Yisrael.

Rabbi Akiva and Ahavat Hashem

The Gemara in Berakhot describes Rabbi Akiva's final moments. As the Romans tortured him, the time for Keriat Shema arrived:

כָּל יְמֵי הָיִיתִי מְצַטֵּר עַל פְּסוּקַיָּהּ: "כָּכָל נַפְשְׁךָ" — אֶפִּילוּ
נוֹטֵל אֶת נִשְׁמָתְךָ. אֲמַרְתִּי: מָתִי יָבֹא לְיָדִי וְאֶקְיָמֶנּוּ? וְעַכְשָׁיו
שָׁבָא לְיָדִי, לֹא אֶקְיָמֶנּוּ ... הֲיֵיהּ מֵאַרְיֶה בְּ"אֶחָד" עַד שֶׁיִּצְתָה
נִשְׁמָתוֹ בְּ"אֶחָד".

All my life I was troubled by this verse, "with all your soul" — even if He takes your soul. I said: When will I have the opportunity to fulfill it? Now that the opportunity has come, shall I not fulfill it? ... He prolonged the word "One" until his soul departed with "One."

Rabbi Akiva did not merely teach ahavat Hashem. He lived toward the moment when he could give everything for it. His final word was echad. It is therefore fitting that the close of Yom Kippur echoes the close of Rabbi Akiva's life. (Berakhot 61b)

Rabbi Akiva and Ahavat Yisrael

But Rabbi Akiva is also the one who closes Masechet Yoma with a declaration addressed to the entire nation:

אָמַר רַבִּי עֲקִיבָא: אֲשֶׁרֵיכֶם יִשְׂרָאֵל! לִפְנֵי כִי אַתֶּם מְטַהְרִין, וְכִי מְטַהֵר אֶתְכֶם? אֲבִיכֶם שְׁבַשְׁמִים ... מִה מְקוֹה מְטַהֵר אֶת הַטְּמְאִים, אַף הַקְדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא מְטַהֵר אֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל.

Rabbi Akiva said: Fortunate are you, Israel! Before whom are you purified, and who purifies you? Your Father in heaven ... Just as a mikveh purifies the impure, so the Holy One, blessed be He, purifies Israel. (Mishnah Yoma 8:9; Yoma 85b).

The Nazir, Rav David Cohen, would repeat this Mishnah on Yom Kippur with great simchah. He explained that Rabbi Akiva's words have the power to plant ahavat Yisrael in the heart. Rabbi Akiva teaches us to look at another Jew through the possibility of taharah. Even when a Jew has sinned, his deepest identity is not exhausted by the sin. He remains someone whom Hashem wishes to purify. Learning to see a Jew in this way is itself an avodah of love.

Shavkei Rabbi Akiva lachasidutei

The Gemara in Sanhedrin reveals how far Rabbi Akiva's ahavat Yisrael usually extended. Rabbi Akiva says that the dor hamidbar has no share in Olam HaBa:

תנו רבנן: דור המדבר אין להם חלק לעולם הבא ... דברי רבי
עקיבא.

The Sages taught: The generation of the wilderness has no share in the World to Come ... this is the opinion of Rabbi Akiva. (Sanhedrin 110b).

Rabbi Yochanan challenges him from the pasuk in Yirmiyahu, in which Hashem remembers the chesed of the generation that followed Him into the wilderness:

שָׁבַקָה רַבִּי עֲקִיבָא לְחִסְדֵּי דִיתֵיהּ, שְׁנָאָמַר: "זְכֹרְתִי לָךְ הָסֵד
נְעוּרֶיךָ אֲהַבְתָּ כְּלוּלֵתֶיךָ לְכֶתֶף אַחֲרֵי בְּמִדְבָּר בְּאַרְץ לֹא זְרוּעָה".
וְיָמָּה אַחֲרִים בָּאִים בְּזְכוּתָם, הֵם עֲצָקִין לֹא כָּל שָׁכֵן?

Rabbi Akiva abandoned his usual piety, as it is stated: "I remember for you the devotion of your youth, the love of your betrothal, how you followed Me in the wilderness, in a land not sown." If others enter by their merit, all the more so should they themselves enter. (Sanhedrin 110b; Jeremiah 2:2).

Rashi's lashon is meduyak:

שָׁבַקָהּ ר' עֲקִיבָא לְחִסְדֵּי דִיתֵיהּ — שְׁרָגִיל לְזָכוֹת אֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל,
וְהִשְׁתָּא מְחַיֵּיב לָהּ.

Rabbi Akiva abandoned his usual piety — for he was accustomed to finding merit for Israel, whereas now he declared them guilty. (Rashi on Sanhedrin 110b)

Rashi defines Rabbi Akiva's chasidut as being ragil lezakot et Yisrael, habitually interpreting in favor of Israel. His normal derech was to search for zechut. Ahavat Yisrael was not merely a feeling; it trained the way he learned Torah and the way he judged another Jew. If a pasuk

could be understood in a way that preserved hope for Israel, Rabbi Akiva searched for that reading.

The Gemara proves this from the children of resha'im. Rabban Gamliel excludes them from Olam HaBa, but Rabbi Akiva says:

רַבִּי עֲקִיבָא אָמַר: בָּאִים הֵם לְעוֹלָם הַבָּא, שְׁנֵאֲמַר: "שְׁמֹר
פְּתָאִים ה' ... וְאַמֹּר: "גְּדֹד אֵילָנָא וְחִבְלֵיהִי, בְּרֵם עֵקֶר נִשְׁרָשׁוּהִי
בְּאַרְעָא נִשְׁבְּקוּ".

Rabbi Akiva says: They enter the World to Come, as it is stated: "The Lord protects the simple" ... and it also states: "Cut down the tree and destroy it, but leave the stump of its roots in the earth." (Sanhedrin 110b)

The children did not sin. Rabbi Akiva refuses to close the door on them because of their fathers. This is his chasidut: to uncover the shoshon that remains alive even when the tree has been cut down.

Eretz Yisrael and the Full path

The question is now stronger. If Rabbi Akiva is the great melamed zechut of Israel, why does he take a severe position specifically regarding the dor hamidbar and the Aseret HaShevatim, the Ten Tribes? These are the two places where Rabbi Yochanan says that Rabbi Akiva left his usual chasidut.

The two exceptional cases share one point: separation from Eretz Yisrael. The dor hamidbar remains in the wilderness and never enters the Land. The Ten Tribes are exiled from the Land and disappear into galut. This is central to the mahalach, because Rav Kook teaches that

Eretz Yisrael is bound to the essential life and neshamah of Am Yisrael.

Eretz Yisrael is the Land of Hashem, the place in which the neshamah of Am Yisrael can be fully revealed. There, ahavat Yisrael is joined to the life of the nation in Hashem's Land. Through that ahavat Yisrael we reach ahavat Hashem. Rabbi Akiva's unusual severity toward the dor hamidbar and the Ten Tribes may therefore reflect what was missing in both: one generation did not enter Eretz Yisrael, and the other was torn away from it.

Rabbi Akiva's regular derech was to search for another Jew's zechut, to preserve hope, and to recognize the pure root that remains within him. In Eretz Yisrael, that ahavat Yisrael can appear in its full form, because the neshamah of Am Yisrael is revealed in the Land of Hashem. The three elements belong to one movement: Eretz Yisrael reveals the neshamah of Am Yisrael, ahavat Yisrael attaches us to that neshamah, and through ahavat Yisrael we reach true ahavat Hashem.

The Avodah of the Day

We can now return to the opening of Yom Kippur. Before we say Kol Nidrei, we declare that we will pray with the avaryanim. We do not excuse aveirah, but we refuse to stop loving the Jew who has sinned or to push him outside the tefillah. This declaration places ahavat Yisrael at the entrance to the day because it is through ahavat Yisrael that the day's movement toward ahavat Hashem takes place.

Then we recite **שְׂמַחָה לֵב וְלִישָׁרִי לְצַדִּיק זְרוּעַ אֹר**, carrying the name of Rabbi Akiva in its final letters. Rabbi Akiva

teaches us the two movements required on Yom Kippur. We must be moser nefesh for Hashem Echad, and we must be ragil lezakot et Yisrael, trained to search for the merit and living root within every Jew.

That is the path from Kol Nidrei to Shema. Rabbi Akiva teaches us to seek zechut, to believe in another Jew's taharah, and to love him even while taking sin seriously. Through that ahavat Yisrael, we reach the final cry of ahavat Hashem: אחד ה' אלוקינו ה' ישראל שמע.

The Teshuva We Forgot

Rabbi Dr. Yehuda Seif

At the very end of Yom Kippur, after twenty-five hours without food or water, with the sun going down and the whole shul on its feet, we say something strange. Petach lanu sha'ar be'et ne'ilat sha'ar. Open a gate for us at the hour the gate is closing. Ne'ilah means "locking." The day is named for a gate swinging shut, and our last request is that it open.

Which gate? A rabbi near Belgrade, writing in 1849, thought we had forgotten where one of those gates leads.

A Missing Mitzvah

Open the Rambam's Hilchot Teshuva and look for the mitzvah to do teshuva. You will not find it. What the Rambam counts is viduy, confession: "when a person does teshuva and returns from his sin, he is obligated to confess... this confession is a positive commandment" (1:1). The confession is commanded; the teshuva itself is tucked into a subordinate clause. That fits Yom Kippur, a day built around viduy, but it leaves out a verse the Ramban thought was unmistakable:

וְשָׁבָתָּ עַד ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ וּשְׁמָעְתָּ בְּקוֹלוֹ.

And you shall return to Hashem your God and listen to His voice. (Devarim 30:2)

Why doesn't the Rambam count it? His own answer is in chapter 7: the Torah "has already promised that Israel will

do teshuva at the end of their exile, and immediately they are redeemed," and he quotes this very verse. He reads veshavta as a promise about the end of days, not a command for today, which only sharpens the question: why would the Torah attach its clearest teshuva verse to the distant future?

Two Teshuvot

Rabbi Yehuda Alkalai, the rabbi of Zemun, across the river from Belgrade, answered this in a short book published in 1849, nearly fifty years before Herzl. There are two kinds of teshuva. The first is teshuva peratit, individual teshuva: regret, confession, a decision to change, each person according to their own sins. It is the work of these ten days, and it is required of every one of us, every day. The second is teshuva kelalit, general teshuva, and it belongs not to individuals but to the whole Jewish people: "that all Israel return to Hashem our God, to the land of our fathers' inheritance."

The verses in Nitzavim, Alkalai says, describe the second kind. "When all these things have come upon you... and you shall return to Hashem your God... then Hashem your God will return your captivity and gather you from all the peoples." The return the Torah places at the end of days is not a return of the heart alone. It is a return of the feet.

His central proof is the word itself. Teshuva did not originally mean repentance. The Tanach says of the prophet Shmuel, u'teshuvato haRamata ki sham beito, "his return was to Ramah, for there was his home" (Shmuel I 7:17). Teshuva means going back to the place you left. The Sages borrowed the word for a sinner

returning to God, and the borrowed meaning became so dominant that, in Alkalai's phrase, the original was forgotten "like the dead from the heart." General teshuva takes the word at face value: we return to the land we left, "for it is the house of our life."

Why the Promise Waits

If general teshuva is a promise, why has it taken so long? Because, Alkalai argues, the promises of redemption are conditional. They wait for us to move first. He tells a story about the Jewish community of Worms, in Germany, which traced itself back to the destruction of the First Temple. When the seventy years of Babylonian exile ended and the exiles went home to rebuild Jerusalem, the Jews of Jerusalem wrote to Worms: come join us. Worms, wealthy and well regarded by its neighbors, wrote back: "You dwell in the great Jerusalem, and we will dwell in the little Jerusalem." For that refusal, the tradition holds, Worms suffered persecution after persecution, more than almost any community in Europe. Chazal say the same of that whole generation: had Israel come up from Babylon "as a wall," all together, the Second Temple would never have been destroyed (Yoma 9b; Shir HaShirim Rabba 8:9). The invitation was issued. Exile was too comfortable.

The Eye of a Needle

The condition, though, is small. We are not asked to finish, only to begin. "Open for Me an opening of teshuva like the eye of a needle," God says in the Midrash, "and I will open for you" (Shir HaShirim Rabba 5:2). In the version Alkalai quotes, what God opens is "the entrance of the Ulam," the entrance hall of the Beit HaMikdash,

whose doorway stood forty amot high and twenty wide. Pierce a pinhole of return, and what God swings open is the Temple itself. Alkalai named his book for the human half of that exchange: Petach KeChudah shel Machat, "An Opening Like the Eye of a Needle."

Do Not Be Ashamed to Come Home

Yirmiyahu calls to the exiles, "Return, O virgin of Israel... how long will you turn away?" (31:20–21). Rashi says the turning away is shame: you are embarrassed to come back. Alkalai answers with a parable from Rabbi Yitzchak Arama's Akeidat Yitzchak. A king's son insists on going to sea. His father warns him the ship will break and everything will be lost, then adds: "If you ignore me and set out, and all of this befalls you, and you alone escape, do not be ashamed to come back to me, thinking 'perhaps he will not receive me.' Come back, and I will receive you."

The son does not have to become worthy before he walks home. He walks home first. Our return to the Land, Alkalai insists, does not depend on our righteousness; once we are back, "the holiness of the Land will help us to unite our hearts to love and fear Hashem." The hardest part of any apology is not the words. It is walking into the room. Yom Kippur is the day we are told, in every Ashamnu, that the door is open and the Father is waiting. Alkalai's claim is that the same is true of the door to the Land.

Two Obstacles

The Rambam lists twenty-four things that block individual teshuva. General teshuva, Alkalai observes, is blocked by exactly two: permission from the rulers of the nations,

and the cost of the journey. In 1849 those were mountains. In our generation both are gone. There is a Jewish state whose law is that every Jew may come, and a plane ticket costs less than a month's rent. We are the first Jews in two thousand years for whom the only remaining obstacles to general teshuva are the ones we carry inside.

And you have already cleared them. You are reading this in Jerusalem. For most of you this is your first Yom Kippur in Eretz Yisrael, and you are about to see something no Jew in Worms or Belgrade ever saw: an entire country stop. No cars on the highways, children on bicycles in the middle of the road, a whole nation keeping the same fast in the same land. Alkalai died in Jerusalem in 1878. He never saw it.

A Gate at the Closing

That is the gate Ne'ilah is asking about. Petach lanu sha'ar: the pinhole is ours to open, and the gate God promised in return is the Ulam. He has been waiting two thousand years for someone to walk up to it.

This Yom Kippur, do both teshuvot, because each is diminished without the other. The private work is real: the apology you owe, the habit you keep excusing, the person you have been avoiding since Elul. Name one before Kol Nidrei and deal with it. Then add a second column. Some of you will make aliyah; most of you do not know yet, and that is fine. The gate does not demand that you arrive. It demands that you start walking. So name one thing in that column too: a decision about next

year, a conversation with your parents, a place in this country you will go and stand in.

Open the eye of a needle. You are closer to the door of the Ulam than any generation before you, and at Ne'ilah, when the gate is closing, that is the one to ask for.

What does Teshuvah for a Sin Really Mean?

Rabbi Yair HaLevi

Yom Kippur is known to be the ultimate day, the day that we become angelic. We are able to say “Baruch Shem Kevod Malchuto Le’olam Va’ed” out loud after Shema because we have reached the level that we’ve ascended from this world. All of this causes us to enter into an important concept of teshuvah.

What does teshuvah for a sin really mean?

The context of this is in the Yerushalmi and the Nevi'im where its asked: “Chotei mah onsho?” Someone who sins, someone who does something wrong, someone who promises something to themselves, to their family, to their friends, to Hashem, to the world, and fails, and they miss the target, and they don't act the way they intended to act—what is their punishment?

There is a concept that someone who sins has done something that cannot be transformed. If you sin on a Sunday, once it's 8:01, it's in the past and you can't change it.

Based on this, what does it mean that a person can transform, eradicate, and even uplift a sin? It happened, and you're not going back into the past. So how in the world does the concept of teshuvah work?

In order to understand what teshuvah is all about, we have to go back to the first sin in Bereishit when Adam eats from the tree. This is what we call the world before the sin.

Three Different Relationships

There are three different relationships. The first relationship that we hear about in the world is between Adam and the adamah, that the first thing that's built is a perfect relationship between Adam and the adamah. They connect to each other. They work together. They assist one another.

The second relationship is called ish and isha, which are similar letters and words. They enable one another. They give each other the idea of "lo tov heyot ha'adam levado"- it is not good for a person to be alone.

The third relationship is between the isha and the nachash. Indeed, there are many conversations between them in the beginning of perek gimel.

We can see here three different circles: the circle of adam and adamah, adam and the isha, and the isha and the nachash. And then, after the sin, the punishments are the exact opposite.

What is the punishment to the nachash? The punishment is that there's going to be "va'eivah ashit beinecha uvein ha'isha." There's going to be hatred: "va'eivah ashit beinecha uvein ha'isha." It's going to be hatred between you and the woman. What used to be a connection has become a disconnection.

Then we go to the punishment of the isha. The punishment for the isha is “ve’el ishech teshukatech, vehu yimshol bach.” The relationship that used to be what we call “ezer kenegdo,” that they work together, now becomes the opposite. It becomes “ve’el ishech teshukatech, vehu yimshol bach”—that you want to be united with him, but you’re not working together anymore.

The third punishment is to Adam. The Torah says that the land is cursed.

To summarize, we can see that all three relationships were transformed. The relationship with Adam and adamah becomes cursed. The relationship of ish and isha is damaged because they become removed from one another; there is now a hierarchy between one another. And finally, the relationship between the isha and the nachash is a relationship of hatred.

What we can see from here is that the real idea of the sin is not the action, but it’s the atmosphere. There’s the idea of what happened before the sin and after the sin, which was an atmosphere. There was an atmosphere of relationships that was prior to the sin, and there was a lack of relationships after the sin.

The sin can’t change. You can’t change the action itself, but we can realize that what’s more important than the action is the atmosphere that enabled the action—the cause, the aveirah, the way that things worked that brought to the action. And that is what always can change.

Therefore, teshuvah is not for the action; teshuvah is for the atmosphere. Real repentance is not, “How do we remove the actions?” but “How do we build a world where we have different atmospheres that don’t only prevent the sin, but they enable us to return to the world that was before the sin, to the world that was perfect?”

The 9th and 10th Day

The Pri Megadim asks: We know that the Torah says to fast on the 9th and 10th day, but we don’t actually fast on the 9th. We actually do the opposite. We have a mitzvah to eat.

And the question would be: How could it be that you’re doing something that’s the opposite, and it’s creating the goal of fasting? Meaning, you’re eating and it’s called fasting. How does that make sense?

The answer is based on this Pri Megadim, that really the whole idea of the ninth day prior to Yom Kippur is to redefine that Yom Kippur. What are our greatest atmospheres?

Food—the food we eat surrounds us all the time. Where we eat, and how we eat, and how fast we eat, and what we eat, and with whom we eat—that’s the atmosphere of our lives. The real idea of the ta’anit is not to abstain from the action, but to ask ourselves, through the action of food: What were the atmospheres that brought me to fail? And that’s what I change on the ninth day.

I change the atmospheres so that I enter Yom Kippur not looking at the actions, not asking, “How do I remove the

action? How do I take away the past?” but, “How do I learn from the past? What were the circles that I was surrounded with that brought me to fail?”

On Yom Kippur, we say many times: “Hashem, Hashem,” twice. What does this mean? Are there two different Gods? The answer is no. There’s the relationship with Hashem before the sin, and then there’s the Hashem after the sin. Even after we sin, we still can connect to Yud-Kei-Vav-Kei. Yet the goal of the connection is to return to before the sin, not to remove it. We need to come back to our world where there’s a relationship and a connection between us and us and us.

This is the story of teshuvah: that teshuvah is not to change the action, but to change the atmosphere that brought the action. This is the story of Yom Kippur.

Being in the Arena

Rabbi Tzvi Wohlgelernter

There is a long-standing tradition to give a drasha before Yizkor on Yom Kippur. My father told me that my grandfather, who was also a Rabbi, would lament that all morning there would barely be a minyan in shul, however, at 11 o'clock sharp, the time Yizkor began, the shul was filled to capacity and by 11:05 they were back to barely a minyan. For many years I have always intellectually understood the significance of Yizkor, but struggled to connect to it in an emotional, visceral way, as Baruch Hashem I have had limited contact with death.

However, over the last few years aside from what we as a country have had to witness, my personal experience in the war has put me into contact with death in a way that I never could have imagined. The extent to how this exposure to death has affected me will take many years of therapy, but at this holy hour, I believe a brief reflection seems appropriate.

What can we learn from those who have passed and especially those who were killed al kiddush Hashem? What does the active memory of יִזְכוֹר demand from us. Because יִזְכוֹר is not mere memory as the great scholar Hayim Yosef Yerushalmi argued but something much more.

The following story can give us a clue as to what is demanded of us:

Rabbi Michael Ber Weissmandl the Rosh Yeshiva of the Nitra Yeshiva who was recognized the world over for his brilliance in Torah scholarship. From 1941-1945, he tried desperately to save Jews from the clutches of the Nazi barbarians. He was probably the greatest rescue activist in the world. R' Michael Ber's wife and five children perished in the Holocaust. Upon coming to America in 1946, he remarried and built a new family. His fifth child was a son. At the brit, he expressed these moving thoughts: "I thank Hashem that He granted me five children to replace the five children that were lost in the Holocaust. Those five children died al Kiddush Hashem; it is my hope and prayer that these five children will merit to live al Kiddush Hashem."

He then added this startling homiletical insight. "I now understand the words in Kedushah in a new light. נִקְדַּשׁ בְּעוֹלָם אֶת שִׁמְךָ, We [who are alive today] sanctify Your Name in this world, כְּנֶשְׁמָם שֶׁמִּקְדִּישִׁים אוֹתוֹ בְּנֶשְׁמָתוֹ, just as they [who were killed al Kiddush Hashem] sanctify It in Heaven above, וְזֶה אֶל זֶה וְאֶמַר וְקָרָא, and may they [the living and the departed] call one to the other and say, קָדוֹשׁ, קָדוֹשׁ, קָדוֹשׁ Holy, Holy, Holy"

We do not leave the dead behind; we bring them with us, they accompany our prayers as we beseech the Heavens for a year blessed with sweetness, safety and success – and the ultimate redemption.

Let us try to understand this idea further. If those who died al kiddush Hashem are sanctifying G-d's name passively, we are called to sanctify God's name actively. How do we do this? I propose, we do it by being players in Jewish history and destiny. Getting involved in any

way possible. Whether that is by wrapping tefillin, complimenting a stranger or learning the daf, there are many things we are able to do. But we must actively seek these things. We may falter, we may not always get it right, but at least we are choosing to sanctify God's name in the way we live.

The greatest response to the horrors we witnessed on October 7th, was the heartening response on October 8th, the rallying call of Jews all over the world and specifically here in Israel. Our response to the death cult was not to go down the nihilistic rabbit hole, losing all meaning in our lives, rather we met their excitement for carnage and slaughter with an equally passionate desire for life and love. When they desecrated God's name with their "Allahu akbar", we sanctified it with an outpouring of chesed and resolve to live! A reclaiming of God as an אֱלֹהִים חַיִּים a living God who calls on us to choose life. For all those precious neshamot that made the ultimate sacrifice which we will now memorialize through יִזְכוֹר and kel maalei, we accept upon ourselves the resolve to be mekadesh shem shamayim through life, and choosing to be active players in Jewish destiny.

Theodore Roosevelt delivered the speech entitled "Citizenship in a Republic" at the Sorbonne in Paris on April 23, 1910. I would like to end with a relatively well-known and powerful quote from this speech:

"It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives

valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows the great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat."

Today we mark our failures and pledge to do better, but just as important it is to rectify our mistakes, we must reaffirm our commitment to being in the arena of Jewish destiny, we are not bystanders but active participants. We owe it to those who are now by the **כסא הכבוד**, we owe it to our ancestors who sacrificed so much for us to be here and we owe it to our children and grandchildren to show them this is what a life of kiddush Hashem is all about! May the memory of all the kedoshim be a constant inspiration and serve as a bracha for all klal Yisrael.

The Simcha of Yom Kippur

Rabbi Daniel Thwaites

As a child I remember hearing a story of a friend of my father, who had been involved in a terrible car accident. He eventually made a full recovery, but I was told that when he was pulled semi-conscious from the wreckage of his car and strapped to a stretcher, he wouldn't stop singing the words of Kol Nidrei again and again. Now this man was not a religious man, but something in his subconscious clearly held on to Yom Kippur very strongly.

There is something about Yom Kippur that really speaks to us on a fundamental level, that wraps itself around our spine. Succot and Pesach and Shavuot are deeply beautiful and meaningful, but something about Yom Kippur resonates with us very deeply. We understand why that is, the idea of standing in judgment before Hashem is a frightening idea. We know that we have sinned, we know we've done things wrong and we come to apologize to Hashem and we know that we don't really have any excuses, and we know there is no real reason why Hashem should accept our tefillot.

Yet together with the sense of fear, it is important to remember that there is a powerful sense of simcha on Yom Kippur. As much as we fear what might happen to us, we also believe that if we really try and repent seriously then G-d will forgive us. Yom Kippur celebrates the special relationship between the Jewish people and Hashem which is embodied in the fact that Hashem forgives our sins without having any real reason to do so.

One of the most well-known statements about Yom Kippur is that of Rabbi Akiva at the end of Mishnayot Yoma:

"Rabbi Akiva said: How fortunate are you, Israel; before Whom are you purified, and Who purifies you? It is your Father in Heaven, as it is stated: "And I will sprinkle purifying water upon you, and you shall be purified" (Ezekiel 36:25). And it says: "The Mikvah of Israel is Hashem" (Jeremiah 17:13). Just as a mikvah purifies the impure, so too, the Holy One, Blessed be He, purifies Israel".

Now this is a beautiful idea, the idea that Hashem comes and forgives us completely on yom kippur just like a mikva grants purity. But it becomes much more powerful when you think about who said it and when it was said. The statement was made by Rabbi Akiva, who lived in the aftermath of the destruction of the Second Bet Hamikdash. During the times of the Mikdash, the entire focus of Yom Kippur had been the Kohen Gadol and the avodah service he carried out in the Bet Hamikdash. In the years following the destruction of the temple, the population must've been terrified, how would Yom kippur work without the bet hamikdash? Would Hashem continue to listen to tefillot and accept teshuva or were the people doomed?

In the midst of all this fear and depression, Rabbi Akiva made his statement and asserted that even without the Bet Hamikdash and without the Kohen Gadol, the Jewish people need only Hashem to grant them forgiveness and that if they do teshuva, this forgiveness will be granted on Yom Kippur and they will be purified of their sins. This is

why Yom Kippur also contains a great element of simcha, of happiness, because we know that if we really try and do our utmost to do teshuva, then Hashem will accept it.

With this idea in mind, the custom in Yeshivat Har Etzion is that immediately following Kol Nidrei, the entire yeshiva together with all the guests who joined the yeshiva for Yom Kippur, would do a vast circuit of the room, with everyone shaking hands and wishing each other a Chatimah Tovah and a good davening. The idea being to recognize the simcha of Yom Kippur and also the importance of coming together as a community, as one cohesive unit to stand together before Hashem and request forgiveness.

Over Yom Kippur we should do all that we can to think about the great simcha of yom kippur and the importance of unity within Am Yisrael. If we come together as a community, focused on doing teshuva, dedicated to improving ourselves, to being better people and better Jews then hopefully our tefillot will be answered and Hashem will accept our repentance and grant all of us a healthy, happy life filled with strengthened dedication to torah, mitzvot and the Jewish people.

Neilah: The Final Stretch of the Marathon

Rabbi Daniel Thwaites

A friend of mine once told me that when he was running a marathon, what helped along the 26-mile route was imagining the almost 26 hours of Yom Kippur. For each mile that passed he envisioned how it felt as we draw closer to the end of the fast. I thought it was a great analogy, but I think it also works the other way around. On Yom Kippur, by the time we reach neilah, we are exhausted. We're tired and hungry and just want to count down the minutes until the end of the fast. But if you run the first 25 and half miles of a marathon and choose to skip out the last half a mile, you haven't done anything. As much incredible work and effort goes into running that distance, without the last few hundred meters, the marathon means nothing.

Yom Kippur is the same. Despite all the effort we have put into kol nidrei and shacharit and mussaf, if we fail to utilize the final opportunity that is neilah, then on some level, the whole day is without real meaning.

Perhaps the most powerful image used to embody the Yamim Noraim, is the image of gates and doorways. Throughout the tefilla we talk about the shaarei shamayim, the gates of heaven, the shaarei dema'ot, the gates of tears and the shaarei teshuva, the gates of repentance. What we do during neilah, which literally means the locking of the gates, we ask that Hashem keeps the gate open a little longer, that He gives us one last opportunity, one more chance to ask him for forgiveness.

Rav Yehuda Amital writes that "In order to merit the opening of the gates of heaven, we have to open the gates of our own hearts. With the words of the prayer שְׁעֵרֵי שָׁמַיִם פָּתַח "Open the gates of heaven, we request divine assistance that will allow us to open our hearts – even just the tiniest opening.

The midrash tells us "The Holy One, blessed be He, says to Israel, 'My children, open for Me just one opening of repentance, be it as tiny as the point of a needle, and I will open for you openings so wide that wagons and carriages could pass through'".

What we need to do as Yom Kippur fades is open our hearts to our true identity, our true calling and destiny. In mincha we read the Book of Jonah, Jonah's purpose in life as a prophet was to transmit the word of G-d. He fled from G-d, not because he didn't believe in G-d, or because he didn't think that G-d would find him wherever he went, he fled from G-d because he was trying to run away from his destiny. He disagreed with the mission he had been given and as a sign of his refusal he chose to flee, even though he knew full well that Hashem would not allow him to do so.

In these final moments of Yom Kippur, we have to awaken to our destiny and our calling. We reach out to Hashem to allow our tefillot to be answered, but we must remember that the responsibility is ours alone. We cannot wait for others to do the work for us. If we want Hashem to give us a chance, we are the ones who have to give our remaining time of tefilla all that we have.

The Gemara in Pesachim quotes Rabbi Yehoshua Ben Levi who said

אפילו מחיצה של ברזל אינה מפסקת בין ישראל לאביהם
שבשמים

"Even a metal wall does not block off the people of Israel from their father in Heaven."

It is a beautiful idea and it is actually used as a practical halachic principle, but on Yom Kippur Chazal tell us that there is nothing between us and Hashem. Hashem is right here with us, all we have to do is reach out to him.

So, as we say the words of Neilah, we should do our best to appreciate every precious moment. As the sun sets, and the shaari shamayim, the gates of heaven slowly creak close as Yom Kippur fades away, we should join together to open our hearts to Hashem and beg Hashem for that final chance to accept our tefillot.

As we hit the final stretch of the Yom Kippur Marathon, please G-d we will be able to invest our remaining strength in this neilah and our teshuva, tefillah and tzedaka will testify on our behalf in the Bet Din Shel Maalah, in the heavenly court. May this neilah serve for us as a beacon of light and inspiration, and guide us to the Derech Hashem, to the way of G-d.

Growing Older but also Growing Deeper

Rabbi Ari Ze'ev Schwartz

As each year comes to an end and one reaches Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, a person gets a little older, has more experiences in life, meets new people, and sees more of the greater world. There is an old Jewish custom to wish a person "Ad Meah Ve'Esrin" - may you live until one hundred and twenty years old. What is the source for this custom? There are some commentators who say that it comes from a verse in the beginning of the Torah describing the mortality of human beings. *"Then God said, 'My Spirit will not struggle with human beings forever. They are mortal and their days will be a hundred and twenty years'" (Bereishit 6:3).* However, there are other commentators who say that the source comes from a description of Moshe Rabbeinu at the end of the Torah. *"And Moshe went, and he spoke the following words to all of Israel. He said to them, 'Today I am one hundred and twenty years old. I can no longer go or come'" (Devarim 31:2).*

One of the lessons we can learn from this is that we are not only wishing a person to live until one hundred and twenty years old, but also that they should grow older in the path of Moshe. How did Moshe grow old? A few chapters later, there is similar verse stating Moshe's age, yet this time it adds a description of how he grew older. *"Moshe was a hundred and twenty years old when he died, yet his eyes were not weak nor his strength gone" (Ibid. 34:7).* In other words, as each year passed by, not only did Moshe become older, but he also became

stronger, developed more inner strength and discipline, and continued to strive toward higher spiritual goals.

Never Stop Growing

According to Rav Kook, one of the signs that a person is truly holy is that they never stop growing and developing their personality. Such a person continues to find more and more things to fix inside of their soul. In Orot HaKodesh, Rav Kook writes:

"The call to purify one's character never ends. One may have already purified it when on an intermediate spiritual level; however, after growing further, new mysteries of life that have never yet been exposed emerge from the depths of chaos for one to refine and clarify. There are holy people who never cease growing. They go me'chayil el chayil (from strength to strength), always engaged in practical repentance, of which purifying and refining one's character is a vital ingredient" (Orot HaKodesh 3, p. 233).

For Rav Kook, the goal of a spiritual life is not to reach some abstract perfection (which is impossible in Rav Kook's eyes), but rather to develop a passion for growth. For example, a person inclined towards worry and anxiety makes a conscious effort to find ways to become calmer and less anxious. Or a person inclined towards anger, makes a deliberate decision to find ways to become less reactive, frustrated and irritated. To use Rav Kook's language, one of the reasons why Moshe Rabbeinu is such a role model is because he never stopped growing and purifying his character.

"There are holy people who never cease growing. They go me'chayil el chayil (from strength to strength), always

engaged in practical repentance, of which purifying and refining one's character is a vital ingredient" (Ibid.).

Indeed, even until the age of one hundred and twenty years old Moshe continued to strengthen his personality and rid himself of any new flaws or imperfections he discovered. *"Moshe was a hundred and twenty years old when he died, yet his eyes were not weak nor his strength gone" (Devarim 34:7).*

This, therefore, is the question of a spiritual seeker who reaches the end of the year and reaches Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. How can I follow in the pathway of Moshe Rabbeinu- of growing older in a way that continues to develop and push oneself in matters of inner growth? How can I walk in Moshe's footsteps- of reaching the age of one hundred and twenty yet never stopping to grow stronger and strive toward higher spiritual goals?

A Yearly Spiritual Exercise

In his book Tzav VeZiruz, the Piazechna Rebbe recommends that a person do the following spiritual exercise each year.

"If you want to serve God and to elevate yourself. If you want to make sure that you are not standing in the same place in your 70th year as in your 13th year. Do this: make for yourself a goal each year. Imagine in your mind, whatever your name is, what type of self you want to be in the upcoming year. What will be your achievements, spiritual work, character traits, and general schedule? This imagined self should be a way of measuring yourself. How much is lacking until you reach this imagined self? Will

your daily spiritual work and self-growth achieve this imagined self for the upcoming year?" (Tzav VeZiruz" #2).

In this piece, the Piazechna Rebbe warns a person against growing older and staying in the same place as they were in last year. In his eyes, it is not enough to grow older and collect more experiences, meet more people, and see more of the world. Instead, a person should be challenging themselves to develop new parts of their soul and personality, deepen their connections to people, and work on strengthening their relationship with Torah and God.

As a way of doing this, the Piazechna Rebbe recommends that each year a person do the following exercise: create an imagined version of oneself and envision what type of person one wants to be in the upcoming year. In the Piazechna Rebbe's opinion, it is not enough to have a general vision of oneself. Instead, one should ask themselves difficult and direct questions. "Is there a specific negative character trait that I am struggling with and want to uproot? "Is there an unhealthy habit that I continue to do over and over again that I want to change?"

Once a person has identified the problem they want to fix, the Piazechna Rebbe says the next step is that a person should imagine what schedule and tasks one will need to follow in order to change this negative trait or habit. *"What will be your achievements, spiritual work, character traits, and general schedule?" (Ibid.).*

Lastly, a person should try to envision what this imagined and ideal self will look like. How will this new version of

myself treat other people, how will this new version of myself pray to God, how will I study Torah? *"This imagined self should be a way of measuring yourself. How much is lacking until you reach this imagined self? Will your daily spiritual work and self-growth achieve this imagined self for the upcoming year?" (Ibid.).*

In the Piazechna Rebbe's eyes, this "imagined self" exercise can have an enormous benefit on one's self-growth and service of God. A person will be able to judge oneself and be honest about one's successes and failures in the upcoming year. A person will be able to say "Yes, I am on the right track and should keep going in this direction. Or no, I am failing my set goals and need to correct myself."

Being Honest with Oneself

In another piece, the Piazechna Rebbe gives an example of how he is doing this in his own life.

"Thank God, I have already entered my fortieth year of life...My years of descent have begun and I have already started to get old...What task should I now take upon myself? Perhaps to study more Torah? Perhaps I should not walk around wasting my time? But it seems that I do not waste time. Perhaps I should distance myself from materialistic lusts? But if I am not deceiving myself, I am not enslaved to materialistic lusts. What do I lack? Simply being a Jew. This is what I truly lack. On the surface it seems that I am the type of person who has everything. Yet I lack one thing: soul. Master of the Universe... what I truly want now is to convert and be a Jew" (Tzav Ve-Ziruz #19).

In this piece, the Piazeszna Rebbe is brutally honest about himself growing older. He does not want to simply grow old in age without growing deeper in his soul. In order to accomplish this goal, he goes into detail, one by one, through the specific spiritual goals and character traits that he thinks he needs to work on. On the one hand, the Piaieczna Rebbe is honest enough to be able to acknowledge that there are things that he has indeed achieved and does not need to focus on as much in the upcoming year. *"Perhaps to study more Torah? Perhaps I should not walk around wasting my time? But it seems that I do not waste time" (Ibid.).*

On the other hand, the Piaieczna Rebbe is also honest enough to be able to admit that there are other things that he is deeply flawed and imperfect in. At the end of the day, the Piaieczna Rebbe will not lie to himself; he is aware that there are character traits and spiritual goals that he has not yet succeeded in accomplishing; there are parts of his inner connection to Torah and God that he is lacking and needs to invest more time during the upcoming year. *"What do I lack? Simply being a Jew. This is what I truly lack. On the surface it seems that I am the type of person who has everything. Yet I lack one thing: soul" (Ibid.).*

The Piazeszna Rebbe, much like Moshe Rabbeinu, does not want to grow older each year and simply "let himself go," making excuses and allowing himself to become weaker. The truth is, it is difficult to blame a person who at the end of a hard year says to themselves on Yom Kippur: "That was a really difficult year, and it is not my fault if I wasn't always my best self and didn't behave in

the proper way." And yet, there is something inside of the soul of the Piazeszna Rebbe that refuses to make excuses for his negative behavior in the previous year (even if they could be justified). There is something inside of the Piazeszna Rebbe that wants to encourage people to follow in the footsteps of Moshe, to push himself to grow and develop each year (even when there are so many reasons to justify taking it easy and forgiving oneself of bad behavior).

Yom Kippur could be a day of making excuses and justifications, a day of explaining to God why it is really not one's fault why they didn't behave so well in the previous year. Or, a person could make a hachrah/strong decision that today will not be a day of excuses, but a day of honesty (not only honesty to God but also honesty with oneself). On Yom Kippur, a person will ask themselves hard and direct questions such as, "Who am I right now and who I do I want to become in the upcoming year?" "How do I react right now in stressful moments and how do I want to react in the upcoming year?" "How do I pray and study Torah right now and how do I want to pray and study Torah in the upcoming year?"

To Grow Old in the Spiritual Path of Moshe Rabbeinu

This, therefore, is one of the deeper meanings of the blessing "Ad Meah Ve'Esrin" - may you live until one hundred and twenty years old. It is not simply a blessing to grow to the old age of one hundred and twenty, but also to grow old in the spiritual path of Moshe Rabbeinu. Moshe was brutally honest with himself each year and continued to grow and push himself even until the old

age of hundred and twenty years old. He was able to look himself in the mirror, stop and reflect about who he is right now and who he wants to be in the upcoming year. *"Today I am one hundred and twenty years old"* (Devarim 31:2).

In a similar way, the Torah wants to challenge each person not only to grow older each year, but also to push oneself to grow deeper. That is to say, to never stop fixing their personality (yes, everyone has flaws they can work on, even Tzadikim like Moshe Rabbeinu and the Piazeszna Rebbe); to continue to find new ways to connect to Torah and mitzvot; and to never cease repairing one's relationships to one's loved ones, friends and strangers.

As said above, according to the Piazeszna Rebbe, one very concrete way of achieving this goal is to do the exercise of an "imagined self" each year, to close one's eyes and imagine the ideal-self one wants to become in the upcoming year. A person must not simply have a general vision, but also be honest about what type of schedule and practical commitments one would need to follow in order to achieve this.

Ultimately, the goal is that a person will be able to stand at the end of each year on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur and say "Today I have turned this age." Or in Moshe Rabbeinu's words, *"Today I am one hundred and twenty years old"* (Devarim 31:2). Moshe was not satisfied with growing older each year, but also made sure that he did not "let himself go" and become weaker in spiritual growth. *"Moshe was a hundred and twenty years old when he died, yet his eyes were not weak nor his strength gone"*

(Ibid. 34:7). A person should challenge themselves each Yom Kippur and say "This year I am this age, yet I will not become weak but will continue to grow and push myself to be stronger and stronger." A person must learn to be honest with themselves each year on Yom Kippur. Yes, there will always be a gap between my present self and my ideal self. Closing the gap completely may be beyond one's grasp, nonetheless, making the gap a little smaller each year is within a person's reach.