

The Yom Kippur Prayer Service Companion

No matter what style of minyan you run, this prayer service companion will help to add insight and inspiration to your services. Machzor commentaries, stories, and discussion ideas are organized in the order of the five Yom Kippur services. Select from among the many quotes and insights to create a personalized commentary on the Yom Kippur davening. The Companion references the corresponding pages in the ArtScroll Machzor for each component of the tefillot and is indicated, for example, by AS: p. 118. Consider leading the *Teshuvah and Viduy Workshop* following Kol Nidrei to familiarize your participants with the concepts and practice of Teshuvah and Viduy before beginning Maariv.

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Note: Since there are components of the Yom Kippur service that are the same as on Rosh HaShanah, the Yom Kippur Prayer Companion contains some content found in the Rosh HaShanah Companion. It is up to the leader of the service to decide which insights and stories to say at which junctions.

Opening Remarks:

These remarks may be made during the evening service, either before or after Kol Nidrei, or perhaps not until the beginning of programming the next morning. The point is to start the services in a way and at that time that will have the greatest impact.

Rabbi Yaacov Haber, Yom Kippur with Simchah, www.torahlab.org – Yom Kippur offers the joy of a second chance.

Good Yom Tov! Yom Kippur is a Yom Tov (a festive day)! “There were no more joyous days for Israel than Yom Kippur and the Fifteenth Day of Av” (Mishnah, Tractate Ta’anit). Yom Kippur – like all the other festivals of the Jewish calendar – has the power to cut short and even entirely cancel the mourning period of a mourner. In the words of the Talmud: “The rejoicing of the nation pushes aside the mourning of the individual.” Yom Kippur must be seen as a day of joy.

Yet, how many of us feel Yom Tovdik (festive)? How many people are excited about the fast? The Torah says in two places, “and you shall afflict your souls...” (Lev. 23:32, Num. 29:7). So let’s decide now if we are in a joyous mood or are we feeling afflicted.

The joy of Yom Kippur is the joy of being given a second chance.

A chassid once asked his rebbe on the day after Rosh HaShanah, “Why pray on Yom Kippur? After all, we’ll inevitably transgress again.” “Look out the window,” the rebbe said, “I’ve been watching this child for days now.” The chassid joined the Rebbe at the window and watched a child learning how to walk. He kept standing, walking and falling. “Just keep watching.” Day after day the chassid returned to witness the same scene. At the week’s end the child stood without falling. “So with us,” said the rebbe, “we may fall again and again, but in the end, God gives us the opportunity we need to succeed.”

Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, is the great fast of the Jewish Year. It is the day that we stand before God and we say, “Here we are again!” We are beating our breasts over the fact that we have not yet perfected ourselves, and at the same time we are smiling because the Av HaRachamim (merciful Father) is still there encouraging us to stand up once again and try to walk once again.

Yom Kippur is the Tenth Day of Repentance, and we can’t mask over the fact that we have looked deeply into our souls over these last few days, we have exposed our weaknesses and shortcomings, and that causes us to weep with anxiety and dread lest I be found wanting on the Day of Judgment. But Yom Kippur is also the Day of Atonement, when all sincere penitents are guaranteed a second chance.

As we begin our day of Yom Kippur, let us all be joyous as we stand up once again with a clean slate and a pure soul. Let's be sure to give everyone around us a second chance.

May God grant us all a new kind of year – where the sounds of our souls will be a sound of unmistakable joy. *Az yemalei schok pinu uleshoneinu rina!* Then our mouth will be filled with laughter and our tongue with glad song!

Based on Rabbi Yisroel Gordon, *Focus: A Yom Kippur Reader, Introduction – Through the introspection we do on Yom Kippur we bring ourselves closer to God.*

Holidays come with mitzvot. Passover has its matzah; Chanukah has its menorah; and Sukkot, well, Sukkot has sukkot (huts that serve as temporary homes during this holiday). Yom Kippur also has a mitzvah. *Teshuvah*, repentance, is the mitzvah of Yom Kippur.

Rabbeinu Yona in *Sha'arei Teshuvah* cites a Midrash that describes teshuvah with the following metaphor. After spending several years in a medieval dungeon, a few desperate souls plan an escape, tunneling their way to freedom. The next morning, the prison guard arrives to find a freshly dug tunnel and an empty cell – except for one prisoner who remained behind! The guard beats the poor fellow, yelling at him, “You fool! Why didn't you flee?!”

Like the fool who enslaves himself by failing to take advantage of the tunnel, many of us have enslaved ourselves to self-destructive behavior. How do we escape these habits? Through the “tunnel” of teshuvah. The sages aptly compared teshuvah to traveling through a dark and frightening tunnel, as expressed in the following verse written by the Prophet Yirmiyahu, “Let us examine our ways and analyze – and return to God” (Lamentations 3:40). Yirmiyahu wrote this verse following the destruction of the First Temple, attributed to the collective transgressions of the Jewish people.

How does this verse reflect a journey through a tunnel? Moreover, why does Yirmiyahu say we need to examine and analyze our behavior – don't we know what we have done wrong and what we need to fix, so why the call for analysis? Why are teshuvah and God's open arms reserved for those who engage in self-examination?

The answer is that the first step in making real and lasting improvements in our lives is to figure out *why* we do what we do. Teshuvah is like going through a tunnel, for it involves entering the dark recesses of our hearts, uncovering root causes of behavior and confronting our negative drives and self-centeredness.

Uncomfortable processes, no doubt, but if we engage in sincere introspection and uncover the true, sacred “I” under it all, we are on the way to freedom. Otherwise, our souls are doomed to remain in the dungeon forever – a dungeon of our own making.

The Midrashic metaphor ends there. However, if we add another Talmudic teaching, we can continue our story. “Rabbi Levi taught: Great indeed is teshuvah for it reaches [all the way] up to the Divine Throne, as the verse states (Hoshea 14:2), ‘Return O Israel, [all the way] to the Lord your God’” (*Yoma* 86a).

When the prisoners reach the end of their tunnel, they find that have burrowed right into the throne room of the king! As we do the mitzvah of teshuvah, digging inwardly and making an honest commitment to improve our character, mend our interpersonal relationships and build a stronger connection to God, we find ourselves rejuvenated and pure, standing not alone, but before God Himself!

Section I. Kol Nidrei (AS: pp. 58-61)

Rabbi Mordechai Becher, Gateway to Judaism, p. 138 – Kol Nidrei symbolizes the opportunity to free ourselves from the past.

Yom Kippur begins with the *Kol Nidrei* prayer, recited by the cantor and the congregation. In this prayer, we solemnly ask God to release us from any vows that we may have forgotten, made inappropriately, or been unable to fulfill in the previous year. It is essential to begin Yom Kippur this way because the sin of violating an oath is so serious that it may prevent one from achieving atonement. *Kol Nidrei* also symbolizes the idea of Yom Kippur as an opportunity to free ourselves from our past. The text of *Kol Nidrei* and the tune with which it is chanted are both of great antiquity, but unknown authorship. The poignant melody and the inspiring words set the tone for the rest of Yom Kippur.

Rabbi Reuven Leuchter, Yom Kippur, Morasha Syllabus – The great sanctity of Yom Kippur outshines any previous attempt to be spiritual.

There is a very simple explanation [as to why we recite Kol Nidrei on Yom Kippur]: A vow is an expression of something that a person determined appropriate to undertake. That is why he vowed to do it. But in light of the great sanctity of Yom Kippur, whatever a person thought throughout the year is simply null and void. Even vows that a person may make in order to be a more righteous person, at this point become worthless.

ArtScroll Machzor, Yom Kippur, p. 52 – The reason we recite Kol Nidrei just before Yom Kippur commences.

Kol Nidrei emphasizes for us the extreme gravity that the Torah attaches not only to formal vows and oaths, but to the general concept that one must keep his word...Consequently, when we preface the Yom Kippur prayers not with pleas for forgiveness, but with a declaration regarding vows, we are reminding ourselves of

the importance of scrupulously honoring our commitments. Thus we begin Yom Kippur with the recognition that a Jew's word is sacred...It is indicative of the gravity Judaism attaches to vows and promises that the Jew prefaces his Yom Kippur prayers for forgiveness and repentance with *Kol Nidrei*; we cannot make peace with God until we absolve ourselves from the grievous sin of violating our word.

Rabbi Eliyahu Kitov, *The Book of Our Heritage*, Vol. I, pp. 83-84 – “Permitting praying with transgressors” is based on the Spanish Inquisition.

The declaration made before the recital of *Kol Nidrei* [We permit prayer with those who are transgressors] has its roots in the events that occurred at the time of the forced conversions imposed upon Spanish Jews. The Church subjected Spanish Jewry to harsh and cruel persecution, forcing them to renounce Judaism and accept Christianity. There were many among the Jews who, unable to withstand the cruel treatment, publicly accepted the new faith even though they continued to practice Judaism in secret, each one of them in his own hiding place, afraid to reveal their faith to others. All year these *anusim* [forced converts] refrained from gathering for religious worship, but on the night of Yom Kippur, they risked their lives and gathered in secret basements to accept upon themselves the sanctity of the day and to plead for Divine mercy for having appeared to be transgressors all year, for it is said that God never abhors the prayers of a multitude even if those praying are transgressors. It was in reference to them – those who were forced by circumstance to become transgressors – that the declaration was inserted into the prayers preceding *Kol Nidrei*.

This declaration was passed down to us, for in our times too, there are many who come to the synagogue, who transgress throughout the year...

The concept of blending the prayers of willful transgressors among Israel together with the prayers of the rest of our nation can be compared to the blending of *chelbenah* with the other prescribed ingredients in the preparation of the *ketoret* (incense) in the *Beit ha-Mikdash* (Temple). Our Sages (Keritot 6b) taught: Any fast that does not include the wicked among Israel [as part of those who fast] is not a fast, for though the odor of *chelbenah* was foul, it was listed in the Torah as one of the required ingredients of the *ketoret*. And Rashi says: “Learn from this that it should not appear to us unworthy to include in our midst – in our fasts and our prayer – the transgressors of Israel, so that they be counted among us” (Rashi, Shemot/Exodus 30).

Based on Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *The Koren Yom Kippur Machzor*, pp. xlvii-iii – *Kol Nidrei* turns the synagogue into a courtroom.

Kol Nidrei is an enigma wrapped in a mystery, the strangest prayer ever to capture the religious imagination. First, it is not a prayer at all. It is not even a confession. It is a dry legal formula for the annulment of vows. It is written in Aramaic. It does

not mention God. [It shows that] the synagogue could be turned into a court of law. That is the function of Kol Nidrei. Precisely because it is not a prayer but a legal process, it signals that for the next twenty-five hours what is about to happen is something more and other than prayer in the conventional sense.

The Beit Knesset (synagogue) has become a Beit Din, a court of law. Sitting on the Throne of Justice is God Himself, and we are the defendants. The trial that began on Rosh HaShanah has reached its last day. We are the accused, and we are about to be judged on the evidence of our lives. So Kol Nidrei, the prayer-that-is-not-a-prayer, transforms the house of prayer into a law-court, providing the setting and mood for the unique drama that will reach its climax at Ne'ilah when the court rises, the Judge is ready to leave, and the verdict, written, is about to be sealed.

The final judgment on Yom Kippur, commencing at Kol Nidrei, is a synthesis of Divine law and love.

Ibid. p. liv – Judaism is a synergy of law and love.

Judaism has been accused over the centuries of being a religion of law, not love. This is precisely untrue. Judaism is a religion of law and love, for without law there is no justice, and even with law (indeed, only with law) there is still mercy, compassion and forgiveness. God's great gift of love was law: the law that establishes human rights and responsibilities, that treats rich and poor alike, that allows God to challenge humans but also humans to challenge God, the law studied by every Jewish child, the law written in letters of black fire on white fire that burns in our hearts, making Jews among the most passionate fighters for justice the world has ever known.

Law without love is harsh, but love without law is anarchy and eventually turns to hate. So in the name of the love-of-law and the law-of-love, we ask God to release us from our vows and from our sins, for the same reason: that we regret and have remorse for both. The power of Kol Nidrei...is [that it sets the scene of Yom Kippur as] a courtroom drama, unique to Judaism, in which we stand, giving an account of our lives, our fate poised between God's justice and compassion.

Rabbi Avi Shafran, The Allure of Kol Nidrei from www.aish.com – Kol Nidrei challenges us to free ourselves from our own internal constraints.

The famous early 20th century German-born American financier Otto Kahn, it is told, was once walking in New York with his friend, the humorist Marshall P. Wilder. They must have made a strange pair, the poised, dapper Mr. Kahn and the bent-over Mr. Wilder, who suffered from a spinal deformity.

As they passed a synagogue on Fifth Avenue, Kahn, whose ancestry was Jewish but who received no Jewish training from his parents, turned to Wilder and said, "You know, I used to be a Jew."

“Really?” said Wilder. “And I used to be a hunchback.”

The story is in my head because Yom Kippur is coming. More specifically, Kol Nidrei.

It has been speculated that the somber mood of Kol Nidrei may be a legacy of other places and times, in which Jews were coerced by social or economic pressures, or worse, to declare affiliations with other religions. The text, in that theory, took on the cast of an anguished renunciation of any such declarations born of duress.

Most Jews today face no such pressures. To be sure, missionaries of various types seek to exploit the distancing of some Jews from their religious heritage. But most of us today do not feel any compulsion to shed our Jewish identities to live and work in peace.

Still and all, there are other ways to be unfaithful to one’s essence. Coercion comes in many colors.

We are all compelled, or at least strongly influenced, by any of a number of factors extrinsic to who we really are. We make pacts – unspoken, perhaps, but not unimportant – with an assortment of devils: self-centeredness, jealousy, anger, desire, laziness...

Such weaknesses, though, are with us but not of us. The sage Rabbi Alexandri, the Talmud teaches (Berachot 17a), would recite a short prayer in which, addressing God, he said: “Master of the universes, it is revealed and known to You that our will is to do Your will, and what prevents us is the ‘leaven in the loaf’ [i.e. the inclination to do bad]...” What he was saying is that, stripped of the rust we so easily attract, sanded down to our essences, we want to do and be only good.

Might Kol Nidrei carry that message no less? Could its declared disassociation from vows strike our hearts as a renunciation of the “vows,” the unfortunate connections, we too often take upon ourselves? If so, it would be no wonder that the prayer moves us so.

Or that it introduces Yom Kippur.

Rabbi Beinish Ginsburg from YUTorah.org – Kol Nidrei sets a mood of remorse as the basis for teshuvah.

Kol Nidrei is one of the most powerful *tefillot* (prayers) of Yom Kippur. What is the significance of *Kol Nidrei*? On a purely *halachic* (legal) level, it is one form of *hatarat nedarim*, nullification of a vow. Why does this play such a central role as we are about to enter Yom Kippur? There are different approaches in the commentaries to this question. The Rav (Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik) *zt”l* developed the following idea.

The Rav explained that the central idea behind *hatarat nedarim* is the declaration of remorse, of *charata*, for having made the vow.

Through the recognition that the original act was in effect a mistake, the vow is nullified retroactively. The Torah provides the authority to change his intention of vow from willful to accidental on the basis of his present understanding rather than on the basis of his state of mind at the time the vow was spoken.

We see that the remorse/*charata* is essential to *hatarat nedarim*.

The Rav goes on to explain that this is exactly the idea behind *teshuvah*. The central part of *teshuvah* is *charata*; we are acknowledging that the sins were done impulsively. I was not thinking when I did the transgression. If I were thinking clearly at the time, I would not have done the transgression. The transgression does not reflect my present value system. This is what we are doing in the process of *teshuvah*. So, when a Jew is hearing and reciting *Kol Nidrei*, he should be thinking that just like a person has the ability to be sincerely remorseful to absolve his *neder*, a person also has to be sincerely remorseful for one's transgressions and in that way to do *teshuvah*.

This is a very powerful message. Based on this understanding, *Kol Nidrei* takes on a broader, more far reaching significance. The words of *Kol Nidrei* focus on *hatarat nedarim*, but the message of *Kol Nidrei* focuses on doing *teshuvah* for all of one's shortcomings.

Rabbi Yaacov Haber, Yom Kippur with Simchah, www.torahlab.org – Kol Nidrei is about letting the inner light shine out.

Recently I heard a remarkable story. During the Second World War, a German soldier was mortally wounded in battle, and as he fell, a priest rushed up to administer the last rites. With his remaining strength, the soldier pushed the priest's cross away, and said: "Ich bin ein Jude!" ("I am a Jew!") The priest replied: "Sorgen sich nicht, ich bin auch ein Jude!" ("Don't worry, I'm also a Jew!")

It is remarkable how every Yom Kippur all over the world, thousands upon thousands of people who otherwise never come near a synagogue, come to the Kol Nidrei service.

It is known that the Kol Nidrei prayer gained in significance during the persecution of Jews in Spain at the time of the Inquisition. People who had been forced to convert, the Marranos, behaved outwardly like their neighbors, but inwardly they remained Jews. Once a year they used this prayer to renounce the oaths they had been forced to make forswearing their own religion in favor of Christianity. Deep down, in their innermost souls, they remained Jewish. The Kol Nidrei was a proclamation that their vows, all their external behavior, was not really them. This prayer helped them cleanse themselves of their outer garments and reach their inner souls.

Today, although there are no such persecutions, there are still Marranos. We are not under pressure by the church, but simply by the environment in which we live. Our inner souls are cloaked with external garments which are just not ours. We walk, act, and talk in ways incongruous to our Judaism. Then there are the inverted Marranos whose outer appearance is that of a Tzaddik (righteous person), but who are lacking inside – missing the spirit and ethics of being Jewish. All of us together need Kol Nidrei; we need to get it together.

Rabbi Dessler in “Michtav MeEliyahu” writes that there is one part of our soul that burns like a tiny flame. That flame has the capacity to survive. No matter how hard its carrier might try to extinguish the flame, it will continue to burn.

This is what Yom Kippur and repentance are about, removing the outer garments and letting the light shine out.

Consider leading the **Teshuvah and Viduy Workshop** following Kol Nidrei to familiarize your participants with the basic concepts and practice of Teshuvah and Viduy before beginning the Yom Kippur Evening Service.

Section II. The Yom Kippur Evening Service (AS: pp. 66-163)

Part A. The Shema (AS: pp. 68-73)

One cannot overstate the significance of the Shema in Judaism. In the words of the Shema, we find the most profound and forceful proclamation of belief in God and the Torah. The Shema is so fundamental to our world view that children learn to recite it as soon as they can speak.

Rav Saadiah Gaon, Translation of the Torah, Devarim/Deuteronomy 6:4 – “Shema” means to know and internalize that there is only one God.

Know Israel, that the Lord is our God, the Lord is One.

Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair (ohr.edu) – In order to sense the reality that lies behind what our five senses tell us, we cover our eyes.

The message of Shema runs counter-intuitive to everything that our eyes tell us. Our physical senses do not teach us that nothing else exists except for Him. Quite the reverse. Our senses tell us that if anything exists at all – it’s me. From my point of view, the world could be an Ultra-High-Definition 3D movie with Surround Sound. My instinctive perception is that nothing else exists except for me. The Shema is the way we reverse this paradigm; the Shema is the way the Jew “sees” beyond the picture that his five senses paint.

Rabbi Shraga Simmons, Shema Yisrael, www.aish.com – The significance of the principle of the oneness of God.

Why is “oneness” so central to Jewish belief? Does it really matter whether God is one and not three?

Events in our world may seem to mask the idea that God is One. One day we wake up and everything goes well. The next day everything goes poorly. What happened?! Is it possible that the same God who gives us so much goodness one day can make everything go wrong the next? We know that God is good, so how could there be so much pain? Is it just “bad luck”?

The Shema is a declaration that all events are from the One, the only One. The confusion stems from our limited perception of reality. One way of understanding God’s oneness is to imagine light shining through a prism. Even though we see many colors of the spectrum, they really emanate from one light. So too, even though it seems that certain events are not caused by God, rather by some other force or bad luck, they in fact all come from the One God. In the grand eternal plan, all is “good,” for God knows best...

When a Jew says Shema, it is customary to close and cover one’s eyes. The other time in Jewish tradition that one’s eyes are specifically closed is upon death. Just as at the end of days we will come to understand how even the “bad” was actually for the “good,” so too while saying the Shema we strive for that level of belief and understanding.

Dr. Lisa Aiken, *The Hidden Beauty of the Shema*, Introduction – The Shema surrounds our day and focuses us on the purpose of life.

The Shema literally accompanies us from cradle to grave. The Minchat Chinuch explains why the Shema and its mitzvot (commandments) “surround” us: People tend to be drawn to materialism and give in to their lusts by following foolish, worldly pleasures. We need constant reminders that we are part of God’s Cabinet, as it were, that we have responsibilities to Him. Without these reminders, we can’t keep focused on what God put us here to do. God in his kindness determined that we should say the Shema twice a day to help us stay on track spiritually.

The general purpose of any mitzvah is to preserve and heighten our spiritual wholesomeness and to attach us to God. Saying the Shema reminds us that our thoughts, speech, and actions affect the entire universe. That, in turn, encourages us to live with ongoing devotion and fervor in our service to the Almighty.

The Shema also refocuses us at least twice a day so that we are not derailed by constant exposure to forces that negate our spirituality. The Shema can help us regain our spiritual bearings and infuse us with tremendous spiritual energy only if we appreciate and concentrate on what we are saying.

Part B. *Baruch Shem Kevod*

Throughout the year, when we recite the Shema, we say the verse of “Blessed is the Name of His glorious kingdom for all eternity” silently. On Yom Kippur, both in the evening and morning Shema, this verse is said out loud, in unison.

Tur, Orach Chaim 619:2 – Only on Yom Kippur do we say *Baruch Shem Kevod*...out loud.

It is customary to say *Baruch shem kevod malchuto l’olam va’ed* aloud, and there is a basis for this [custom] brought in the Midrash on Parshat Va’etchanan, which states that when Moshe (Moses) went up to the heavens, he heard the angels praising God with *Baruch shem kevod malchuto l’olam va’ed*, and he brought this [praise] down to the Jewish people.

Throughout the year, this praise is recited softly since the Jewish people have transgressions. However, on Yom Kippur when we are purified from our transgressions, we are compared to angels and can therefore say *Baruch Shem Kevod* out loud (See Devarim Raba, Va’etchanan 2:36).

Part C. The Thirteen Attributes of Mercy (AS: pp. 108-123; see also Neilah Service, pp. 736-751)

A major feature of the Yom Kippur prayer service is the recital of the Thirteen Attributes of Divine Mercy. Since it appears first on Yom Kippur evening, we have placed our commentary of it here. These ideas can also be used to highlight the Neilah service in which the Thirteen Attributes also feature prominently.

Shemot (Exodus) 34:1-7 – After God forgives the sin of the Golden Calf and tells Moshe to carve new tablets, He teaches him the Thirteen Attributes.

God said to Moses, “Carve out two tablets for yourself, just like the first ones. I will write on those tablets the same words that were on the first tablets that you broke. Be ready in the morning, so that you will be able to climb Mount Sinai in the morning and stand waiting for Me on the mountain peak. No man may climb up with you, and no one else may appear on the entire mountain. Even the cattle and sheep may not graze near the mountain.” Moses carved out two stone tablets like the first. He then got up early in the morning and climbed Mount Sinai, as God had commanded him, taking the two stone tablets in his hand. God revealed Himself in a cloud, and it stood there with [Moses]. [Moses] called out in God’s name. God passed by before [Moses] and proclaimed, “God, God, Omnipotent, merciful and kind, slow to anger, with tremendous [resources of] love and truth. He remembers deeds of love for thousands [of generations], forgiving sin, rebellion and error. He does not clear [those who do not repent], but keeps in mind the sins of the fathers to their children and grandchildren, to the third and fourth generation.”

Talmud Bavli, Rosh HaShanah 17b – God showed Moshe how the Jewish people can attain forgiveness through the Thirteen Attributes.

“And God passed before [Moshe] and called out [the Thirteen Attributes]...” Rabbi Yochanan said, “Were it not written in Scripture we would never have imagined such a thing, but this comes to teach us that God wrapped Himself, as it were, [in a tallit] like a *chazzan* (cantor) and showed Moshe how to pray. [God] said to [Moshe], ‘Whenever the Jewish people sin, they should act like this, and I will pardon them.’”

It is significant that we do not request anything from God in this prayer, not even His forgiveness. All we do is mention God’s attributes. What sort of prayer is this if we are not actually asking for anything?

In truth, however, this is our greatest prayer, because God deals with us in proportion to the extent that we recognize His power and His Attributes in this world. By expressing the Thirteen Attributes in prayer, we further recognize God’s Attributes. The more tuned in we are to God’s mercifulness, the more God will act with us in kind.

Ramban (Nachmanides), Emunah U’Bitachon, Ch. 19 (Kitvei HaRamban, Vol. II p. 419) – The way we think of God, so He acts towards us.

You should know that whenever one thinks in his heart [about one of] God’s Name[s] [i.e., one of God’s Attributes]...there is an awakening [so to speak] before God according to the attribute which that person ascribes to Him.

As the following source shows, accessing the power of the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy is not limited to verbal expression or intellectual recognition alone.

Rabbi David ibn Zimra (Radbaz), Metzudat David Zimra, Mitzvah #11 – Acting in accordance with the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy is the key to benefiting from their power of forgiveness.

Moshe’s prayer was not accepted just because he mentioned God’s Attributes. What the Sages meant when they said that “a covenant was sealed with the Thirteen Attributes, that we will not be left empty-handed,” and when they said that “we learn that God wrapped Himself up like a *chazzan* and said that ‘whenever the Jewish people act like this, I will pardon them,’” the intent is that they should act in accordance with His Attributes, not merely mention them verbally.

One who emulates God’s behavior will be treated by God in a like manner. That is what God meant when He said, “they should act like this and I will pardon them,” i.e. act in line with these merciful attributes. If we act in accordance with God’s Attributes of Mercy, God will reciprocate and act mercifully with us as well.

Rabbi Mordechai Becher, Gateway to Judaism, p. 138 – The Thirteen Attributes of Mercy were taught to Moshe so they would be used at times of communal need.

Another powerful prayer vehicle is known as the Thirteen Attributes of (Divine) Mercy. Taught to Moses by God Himself as a means of breaking through to His mercy when dire threats arise, Moses utilized the Thirteen Attributes when he begged God to forgive the Jews for the sin of the Golden Calf. The Thirteen Attributes list various facets of God's mercy in His relationship to man:

Lord, Lord, God, Compassionate and Gracious, Slow to Anger, and Abundant in Kindness and Truth. Preserver of Kindness for thousands of generations, Forgiver of iniquity, willful sin, and error, and Who cleanses.

This description of God is meant to be contemplated and internalized by the one seeking forgiveness. By focusing on these benevolent attributes of God, one forges a positive connection with Him, worthy of arousing mercy.

Eventually, after Moses used the prayer of the Thirteen Attributes, God did forgive the Jewish people on Yom Kippur and gave them a second set of tablets, replacing the broken first set. Fittingly, the Thirteen Attributes describing God's mercy are recited many times during the Yom Kippur prayers.

www.ou.org/chagim/elul/selichotattrib.htm – Brief Explanation of the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy (Based on the ArtScroll Siddur).

1) *Hashem*. This Name denotes mercy. God is merciful before a person sins, even though He knows the evil lies dormant in the person. 2) *Hashem*. G-d is merciful after the sinner has gone astray. 3) *E-L*. This Name denotes power. God's mercy sometimes surpasses even the degree indicated by the name Hashem. 4) *Rachum*. Compassionate; G-d eases the punishment of the guilty, and He does not put people into extreme temptation. 5) *ve-Chanun*. And Gracious; even to the undeserving. 6) *Erech Apayim*. Slow to Anger; so that the sinner can reconsider long before it is too late. (Rav Moshe Cordovero in "*Tomer Devorah*," describes G-d as a "*Melech Ne'Elav*," an "Insulted King," Whose subjects disobey Him, yet He maintains their existence.) 7) *Ve-Rav Chessed*... And Abundant in Kindness...; towards those who lack personal merits. Also, if the scales of good and evil are evenly balanced, He tips them towards the good. 8) ...*Ve-Emet*. And Truth; G-d never reneges on His word. 9) *Notzer Chessed La-Alafim*. Preserver of Kindness for thousands of generations; The deeds of the righteous benefit their offspring far into the future. 10) *Nose Avon*... Forgiver of iniquity...; G-d forgives the intentional sinner, if he or she repents. 11) ...*Va-Phesha*...and willful sin...; Even those who purposely anger G-d are allowed to repent. 12) ...*VeChataah*...and error; This is a sin committed out of carelessness or apathy. 13) *VeNake*. And Who cleanses; G-d wipes away the sins of those who repent.

Rabbi Yitzchak Berkowitz, Selichot and the 13 Attributes from www.aish.com – The Thirteen Attributes call upon us to emulate God’s virtues.

For serious Jews, what counts in life is meaning and substance, not the illogical or the quick-fix, quirky “spiritual” stuff. We’re not into playing games. Therefore it’s very puzzling that a good part of the liturgy for the High Holiday season includes repeated requests for God to recall our ancestors’ merits on our behalf, and invoking the “13 Attributes of Mercy” so that He may forgive us.

If the whole season is dedicated to growth and change, why are we looking for shortcuts? In other words, how do we celebrate growth while asking for mercy? We should spend the whole time soul searching and making resolutions for the future – yet the main focus of our prayer seems to be on escaping responsibility for our deeds! Additionally, if God has these “13 Attributes of Mercy,” why must we “remind” Him of it? Is He only merciful if we say this prayer?! What exactly are we trying to accomplish?

The classic Torah commentary “Tomar Devorah” explains that although the “13 Attributes” arouse divine mercy, the recitation of these alone is inadequate. Rather, we need to make sure that in action, our own lifestyles reflect these attributes as well. For example, the Talmud says that if you are patient with others, then God will be patient with you. You can only demand that God employ all these attributes if you apply them in your own relationships.

Ibid. – The Thirteen Attributes humble us by bringing us to recognize that despite our transgressions we survive on God’s mercy.

There’s a different approach that goes deeper. The purpose of mentioning the “13 Attributes” is to focus us on the nature of God, to realize that He is merciful. (Even though we already know this, we keep forgetting!) We have no trouble remembering what foods give us indigestion or to keep away from poison ivy. So when we have clarity on the existence of God and the truth of Torah, why do we forget?

The answer is because we’ve never really experienced spiritual indigestion. When you’ve had a bad experience with food, you’re careful after that. You’ve experienced the full consequences of your actions, and you remember what it feels like.

With the spiritual, your conscience may bother you, but you’ve never experienced the full result of transgression. This is both because we’re not fully in touch with our souls, but more importantly because in His mercy, God does not allow us to immediately suffer for what we’ve done wrong. According to the “attribute of justice,” a transgressor should drop dead on the spot. We survive because the Almighty is merciful and gives us a chance.

This is why the “13 Attributes” speak of “God’s patience.” The same God Who created you with a clean slate and a world of opportunity gives you another

opportunity after you've misused the first one. If you truly understand what "wrong" means, then even if you seem to be benefiting from your wrong actions, you have to tune into God's mercy and see what He's doing for you. Then, that success will not mislead you, because you'll be humbled. "I was rude to others and nevertheless I became popular – because God is patient and loves me." Rather than using your success as a way of clouding truth, use it as a way of appreciating God's care and closeness.

Part D. Discussion for YK Night – Explaining the Meaning of Fasting

There are five so-called "afflictions" that we take upon ourselves on Yom Kippur: not eating or drinking, not washing ourselves, not anointing (soothing our hair or skin with oils or lotions), not wearing leather shoes, and not engaging in marital relations. Seeing as fasting is the most commonly known of these forms of abstention, we will focus our discussion on it, although the same principle applies to all five.

Aish UK – What's all this fasting business?

Judaism doesn't advocate abstention. We relish physical pleasures and aim to leverage them for higher purposes. But we all face a constant battle between our natural biological instincts and our higher desires. Soul versus body. Sometimes we delay instant gratification for a long-term goal... and sometimes we don't. Sometimes, in a moment of anger, impulse, or temptation, we can ruin a relationship, or do something we regret. Our head tells us it's a bad choice, but our heart overrules, and – insanelly – we do it anyway.

On Yom Kippur, we live as a soul without a body. Angels for a day. When we feel the body screaming, "I'm hungry!" we politely tell it it's going to have to wait; its chances of survival are pretty good.

On Yom Kippur, we live free of our physical drives, liberated from our lusts, and torn from our tempers. Free to be alone with our higher ambitions and deeper yearnings. Of course it's up to us. If we choose to focus on our empty stomachs, we'll be counting the minutes till it's over. But if we allow ourselves to spend the day as genuinely elevated spiritual beings, we'll be wishing it could last so much longer than 25 hours! It's an incredible opportunity to evaluate our actions and choices, and to create a new vision of what we can improve for the year ahead.

Section III. The Yom Kippur Shacharit Service (AS: pp. 234-477)

The Shacharit service for the High Holidays shares some elements of a regular weekday or Shabbat prayer service while other parts are unique to these days. It may be useful to offer insights on such concepts as the Shema and silent Amidah, even if they are standard to every prayer service.

Additionally, changes to the Amidah that highlight the significance of the day should be pointed out. Avinu Malkeinu, since it is such a well-known prayer, is a perfect opportunity to share insights. The Torah reading for Yom Kippur will be discussed in the Mussaf section since they share a common subject: the divine service of the High Priest. Finally, unlike Rosh Hashanah, the Yom Kippur Shacharit service concludes with Yizkor (Memorial Service) for whomever it is applicable.

Part A. Amidah

Silent Prayer (AS: pp. 350-365)

Rabbi Yitzchok Kirzner with Lisa Aiken, *The Art of Jewish Prayer*, p. 11 – Verbalizing our prayers helps to create a deeper relationship with God by making His reality more concrete to us.

One of the tenets of Jewish prayer is that it is not enough simply to “think” a prayer, or to have a certain feeling in one’s heart toward God. Jewish prayer requires that people actually say the words that they think or feel. Why do we have to verbalize prayer? Why can’t we just feel something in our hearts and communicate it to God through our thoughts?

When two people have a relationship with each other, one of the greatest challenges of the relationship is in communicating effectively with each other...In the same vein, it’s not enough for us to worship God in our hearts. We must also communicate our thoughts and feelings verbally, or they cannot enable us to develop a deeper relationship with God. When we say what we feel, God becomes more of a reality for us, and we show a deeper level of sincerity about the relationship. No normal person speaks out loud unless someone is listening. Our verbalization concretizes for us that God really hears what we say.

Verbalizing our prayers helps us to pray better in another way as well.

Ibid. – Verbalizing helps us to concretize our thoughts.

Once we verbalize our feelings, they attain a reality that is much stronger for us than had we not committed these feelings to words...When we say something, the power of our words crystallizes our feelings in a way that demands inner clarification. Until something has been committed to words, it can remain a nebulous feeling. Our relationship with God requires that our inner feelings become clear to us and that we use words to express our feelings to connect with Him.

Prayer is not recited loudly, yet it is not enough to merely meditate the words of the Amidah.

Siddur HaRav, Sha'ar haTefila 18c-d – When you're close, you don't have to shout.

“His right hand embraces me” (Song of Songs 2:6) refers to the Amidah. It can be compared to someone who speaks to the king and whispers secrets in his ear; he speaks to him of very deep secrets. In such a case he certainly nullifies his own existence and doesn't feel his existence, since he has come so close to speak in the ears of the king...This is the meaning of “His right hand embraces me” (ibid.).

The sense of proximity to God overshadows our own existence as we are overcome by being in the presence of the Almighty. The silent prayers reflect the special intimacy with God that we enjoy during prayer.

Zachreinu L'Chaim (AS: pp. 368-369)

Rabbi Chaim Freidlander, Rinat Chaim pp. 1-3 – We ask for God to “remember us for life” in the blessing related to Avraham Avinu, because we want God to see the traits of Avraham inherent in us.

As Rosh HaShanah approaches, we become acutely aware of the fact that it is *Yom HaDin*, the Day of Judgment, in which we will have to submit an accounting of all our deeds during the year that has just passed. Our deeds will be scrutinized and evaluated, and this evaluation will decide our fate. We know all too well that our merits are few, our good deeds far from perfect. By what merit can we expect to be judged favorably?

The Tur (Orach Chaim, Hilchot Rosh HaShanah 582) states: “Our Sages enacted to add the supplication of ‘Remember us for life,’ to the blessing of *Magen Avraham*, The Shield of Abraham, [during the High Holidays and the Ten Days of Repentance]... ‘Remembrance’ is mentioned regarding Avraham, as it says (Tehillim/Psalms 105:42): ‘For He remembered His holy word to Avraham, His servant.’ Therefore, they enacted to recite ‘Remember us for life’ in the blessing of *Magen Avraham*.”

The simple explanation of this connection is: since the word “remembered” is associated with Avraham Avinu (our father), therefore, in the first blessing of *Shemoneh Esrei*, the blessing of *Avot - Magen Avraham* – we mention that God “remembers the kindnesses of the Patriarchs.” And our Sages enacted that during the Ten Days of Repentance this should be followed with another remembrance, “Remember us for life.”

Let us elaborate upon this thought further. God's beneficent “remembering” of the people of Israel favorably is rooted in His promise to Avraham Avinu at the Covenant between the Parts (Bereishit/Genesis 15), which guaranteed the eternal existence of the people of Israel. As it says in Vayikra/Leviticus (26:42-44), “And

also My covenant with Avraham I will *remember*...and notwithstanding all that – even when I bring upon them these calamities (Rashi) – when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not have despised them, nor rejected them, to completely destroy them [or] to annul My covenant with them.” This means, quoting Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler (Strive for Truth, Vol. II, part 3, p. 63): “Every member of *Klal Yisrael* (the Jewish people) possesses a point of inwardness which can never be extinguished... This derives from the promise given to Avraham Avinu at his covenant with God... This means that ‘the holy point’ of attachment to Hashem will never cease to exist in the hearts of the people of Israel throughout all the exiles. God will never allow them to fall into spiritual annihilation and its consequence – physical annihilation, God forbid.”

We proclaim that God “remembers the kindnesses of the *Avot* (Patriarchs),” which actually means the legacy of our Patriarchs – especially of our first forefather, Avraham Avinu – and their virtues that are imbued in us as their spiritual heirs. This merit, which is actually theirs, causes us to be favorably remembered by God. That is why it is so proper to attach the supplication of “Remember us for life” to the plea of “Who remembers the kindnesses of the Patriarchs”; the covenant of the *Avot* and their merit should stand in good stead for us to be remembered for life.

Uvchen ten pachdecha (AS: pp. 410-411)

Rabbi Avigdor Nebenzahl, Thoughts on Rosh HaShanah, from www.yutorah.org – We’re asking for recognition, not revenge.

We pray to God: “*Uvchen ten pachdecha Hashem Elokeinu...*” And so, too Lord, our God, instill Your awe upon all Your works; let all creatures prostrate themselves before You; let everything that has been made know that You are its Maker.” We hope and pray that the entire world comes to recognize God’s rule.

Any judgment God metes out to the enemies of Israel is not revenge for its own sake, rather a means by which “to perfect the universe through the Almighty’s Sovereignty.” The purpose of the judgment is to reveal in a clear manner, that only one Force created this world, runs it, and will bring about its redemption. When every living being arrives at this realization, the world will reach its ultimate state of perfection. *Veyeda kol pa’ul ki ata pe-alto veyavin kol yetzur ki ata yetzarto*: “Let everything that has been made know that You are its Maker, let everything that has been molded understand that You are its Molder.”

We pray not only for the Jews to recognize this, but for Germans, Arabs, and all other enemies of Israel that that they too should accept the Kingship of God. Accepting the Kingship of God does not imply that the evil people will die.

Rabbi Joseph Dov Soloveitchik, On Repentance – Why pray for fear? Because the fear of God, rooted in the recognition of His complete control over the world, frees us from all other fears.

An eminent psychiatrist once told me:

“Had I the authority to do so, I would eliminate the High Holy Day prayer that begins with the words, ‘*Place Your fear...*’ Fear is the major cause of the various mental illnesses that beset mankind. In order to preserve one’s mental health, one should be free of fears. There is certainly no reason why anyone should ever *pray* for fear,” he confidently pronounced.

His words actually helped me understand the true nature of this prayer, and this is what I told him:

“Everyone seems to be beset with fears of all kinds. Some are afraid that they will not succeed in their careers; others fear that they will lose their wealth or status, or that they will fail to achieve sufficient status. Many people fear sickness and bodily weakness, as well as a host of other possible problems and difficulties. Man is constantly plagued with all sorts of often insignificant fears. I am not a psychiatrist, but I do know that there is one fear that can eradicate all others – it is the fear of G-d! That is what we request in this High Holiday prayer: We pray that this most significant ‘fear’ will free us from all the others that adversely affect our lives.”

Part B. Avinu Malkeinu (AS: pp. 436-439; see also Neilah Service, pp. 758-763)

Avinu Malkeinu is a widely known prayer, particularly for the last stanza which is sung in a tune familiar to most of those who attend High Holiday services. As such, attendees will be interested in hearing explanation and insight.

The origin of the Avinu Malkeinu prayer is from the following Talmudic story:

Talmud Bavli, Ta’anit 25b – Rabbi Akiva was the first to use the formulation of “Avinu Malkeinu” as a prayer to God.

It is related that Rabbi Eliezer once [during a drought] stepped down before the Ark [in synagogue] and recited the twenty-four blessings for fast days, but his prayer was not answered. Rabbi Akiva stepped down after him and exclaimed: “Our Father, our King, we have no King but You; our Father, our King, for Your sake have mercy upon us,” and rain fell.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, The Koren Rosh HaShanah Machzor, p. 448 – Avinu Malkeinu is a prayer that asks God to regard us with the compassion of a father before the justice of a king.

It was the genius of Rabbi Akiva to juxtapose two ideas – God is our King and we are His subjects, yet God is also our Father and we are His children – and with utter simplicity pray that God see us with the love of a parent before considering

our lives with the detachment of a king.

The Nobel Prize-winning physicist Niels Bohr, who devised complementarity theory in quantum physics, the principle that you cannot chart simultaneously the position and the velocity of a particle, said that the idea came to him when his son confessed to having stolen an item from a local shop. He found that he could think of him with love as a father, and with justice as a judge, but not both at the same time.

Rabbi Akiva's insight is two-fold: (a) God does see us simultaneously as both children and servants, and (b) our prayer is that He relate first and foremost to us as His children. The story of the physicist highlights the first insight because it is impossible for humans to relate to anything in two different ways simultaneously, whether it's a particle or a child (though certainly God has no trouble doing either). Bohr therefore applied the human perspective of parenting to his physics research. Rabbi Akiva teaches us that God is beyond this human limitation and thereby enables us to pray and appeal to God's sense of compassion as a father even at a time of judgment.

Machzor Masoret HaRav for Rosh Hashanah, pp. xli-xlii – Rabbi Akiva taught us that we have the power to approach God directly as His children.

The Mishnah in Yoma (85b) cites the famous statement of Rabbi Akiva: "Happy are you, O Israel! Before whom do you purify yourselves? Who purifies you? Your Father in Heaven!" What new lesson was Rabbi Akiva illuminating in his homily? Who besides God could grant purification?

God reveals Himself to us in two ways: as our Father and as our King. In the Beit HaMikdash, which is His palace and His abode that we are invited to enter, He functions as a King, and in that role, He is accessible only by means of a formal protocol, with all the manifestations of majesty that accompany entering the presence of a king. To be granted atonement on Yom Kippur from God in His role as the King, the formal ceremony of the Yom Kippur Avodah is necessary, with the Kohen Gadol performing the service via an intricate series of offerings and rituals.

What Rabbi Akiva taught, however, was that the atonement of the "essence of the day," of the day of Yom Kippur itself, no longer required formal ceremonies; our approach to God can now be unmediated and as direct as a son's approach to his own father. When a son approaches a father, the formality is out of place; one can enter one's father's presence directly and at any time without the need for formal protocol. Rabbi Akiva thus stressed that it is our "Father in Heaven" Who purifies us: that we have complete access to Him even without the Beit HaMikdash. God then relates to us as a Father and is thus Himself the "Hope of Israel." In light of the above, it is interesting to note that Rabbi Akiva is the author of the prayer Avinu Malkeinu.

Chatanu Lefanecha

Moshe Bogomilsky, “Who Sinned?” from www.chabad.org – We’re all in the same boat.

Our Father our King, we have sinned before You.

Why does the individual say “we sinned” in plural?

A passenger on a boat once noticed another passenger drilling under his seat. In astonishment, he bellowed, “What are you doing?” The other responded, “Mind your own business. I’m drilling under my seat. I paid my fare, and this is my seat.” The man said to him, “Fool, don’t you realize that if water comes in under your seat, we are all doomed!”

The Talmud says that all Jews are responsible one for another. The reason for this is that the Jewish people are like one body. Thus, the Jew who transgresses affects the entire Jewish nation. Likewise, when a Jew does a good deed it has a good effect and benefits the entire Jewish people.

Ki Ayn Banu Ma’asim

Rabbi Jacob ben Wolf Kranz (Maggid of Dubno), from Aaron Levine’s *The New Rosh HaShanah Anthology*, p. 171 – We ask for much, knowing that we have little to offer in return.

A retail merchant who dealt in fabrics made his way to his wholesale supplier to buy the goods he needed for his business. The wholesaler instructed his workers to wait on the merchant and to bring him all that he ordered. Standing in the middle of the warehouse, the merchant bellowed all sorts of orders and requests.

“I want 1,000 yards of that cloth, 2,000 yards of the blue velvet, 3,000 yards of that white silk,” he shouted, and on and on he went, requesting many other items. When it came time to reckon up the price of the goods and to pay the bill, the merchant took the wholesaler to the side and, very embarrassed, whispered in his ear: “Listen, I can’t give you any money for this right now. Please allow me credit until I can pay you.”

So it is with us, said the Dubno Maggid. We shout out all sorts of requests to God in the Avinu Malkeinu prayer. We want forgiveness, health, a good life, wealth, redemption, and many other things. But when it comes down to the last verse (to pay the bill, so to speak), we whisper: “Our Father, our King, be gracious to us and answer us, though we have no worthy deeds (with which to pay You for our large order); please grant us charity and kindness, and save us.”

Part C. Torah Reading (AS: 452-469)

The rituals surrounding the Torah reading, such as the removal from the ark, kissing the Sefer Torah, and the calling up of Aliyot, will be familiar to those with any synagogue exposure. This is a good time for some “no-fear participation” and some familiar tunes.

The subject of the Yom Kippur morning Torah reading is the Temple service of the High Priest. Since this service is a major feature of Mussaf, it will be discussed below in that section (see Mussaf, Part B. The Service of the High Priest). As an introduction to the Torah reading, you might offer the following insights into the importance of the sacrifices and the services performed in the Holy Temple in ancient days with a focus on their meaning for us today:

Perhaps there is no area of the Torah which so challenges our “modern understanding” of things as that of sacrifices. Centuries ago, the Kuzari stated that had the Torah not legislated such a thing we would never have imagined that the idea of slaughtering and offering up an animal would bring us closer to God. But closeness is what it is all about.

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, Vayikra/Leviticus 1:2 – God’s closeness, achieved by the sacrifices, is the ultimate good.

The purpose of every sacrifice is closeness to God: “They will seek the closeness of God” (Yeshaya/Isaiah 58:2)...For closeness to God is the only yardstick by which to measure the truth of one’s worldview and one’s wellbeing. There, in the holy chambers of the Temple, it becomes clear that one’s spiritual and physical “wellbeing” will only develop out of closeness to God under the auspices of His law – and that this is the destiny of one’s purpose...there, the only good is found in closeness to God. Furthermore, only closeness to God is truly good for man: “God’s nearness is my good” (Tehillim/Psalms 73:28).

Rabbi Baruch Leff, Forever His Students, p. 90 – Sacrifice is the ultimate expression of closeness with God.

Sacrifices are an outgrowth of a tremendous drive to serve and relate to a higher power. A man who really loves his wife cannot simply tell her that he loves her. He feels compelled to buy her flowers or chocolates to express his love and to give something of himself to her. So it is with relating to God. Because we are physical beings, we are driven to show our love and passion for God in some physical form. And this giving of oneself to God must be in an ultimate sense. I want to give my entire existence, my whole life to God. I express this with the offering of my animal’s life. This is why the word for sacrifice in Hebrew is “Korban,” meaning closeness.

Without the Holy Temple in Jerusalem, we no longer have the opportunity to bring sacrifices to God or to perform the sacrificial rituals outlined in the Torah. In lieu of sacrifices we now have our prayer services.

Talmud, Megillah 31b – Recitation of the sacrificial passages comes in lieu of the sacrifices themselves.

Abraham said before God: “Master of the World, perhaps Israel will sin before You, and You will act with them like You acted with the generation of the Flood and the generation of the Dispersion.” He said to him, “No.” He replied: “Master of the World, with what will I know?” He told him, “Take for me a calf..” He said to Him, “This is sufficient during the time that the Temple stands. But when the Temple will not stand, what will become of them?” He replied to him, “I have already enacted for them the order of sacrifices. Whenever they will read them, I consider it for them as though they have brought the sacrifice before Me, and I forgive them for all their iniquities.”

How did prayer come to replace sacrifices? What do prayer and sacrifices have to do with each other?

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, Koren Siddur, Introduction – Prayer did not come to replace sacrifice offerings after the destruction of the Temple; rather, it is the internal dimension of that very same sacrificial experience.

The transition from sacrifice to prayer was not a sudden development. A thousand years earlier, in his speech at the dedication of the Temple, King Solomon had emphasized prayer rather than sacrifice (I Kings 8:12-53). Through Isaiah, God had said, “My House shall be called *a house of prayer* for all peoples” (Is. 56:7). The prophet Hosea had said: “Take words with you and return to the Lord...Instead of bulls we will pay [the offering of] our lips” (Hos. 14:3). Sacrifice was the external accompaniment of an inner act of heart and mind: thanksgiving, atonement, and so on. Therefore, though the outer act was no longer possible, the inner act remained. That is how sacrifice turned into prayer.

So instead of actually performing any sacrifices in synagogue, we will read about the holy service of the High Priest; later, during the Mussaf service, we will read more about it in depth.

Part D. Yizkor (AS: pp. 470-477)

At this point in the service, those who have lost a parent remain in the sanctuary for the Yizkor service. All others exit.

Rabbi Eliyahu Kitov, The Book of Our Heritage, Vol. I, pp. 90-91 – The good deeds of children atone for their parents.

Our sages ordained that children should remember the souls of their departed parents when praying on the Festivals. At that time, they should pledge charity on behalf of the departed souls, to serve as a source of merit and enable the souls to ascend even higher. This brief memorial service follows the Torah reading, preceding the return of the scrolls to the ark.

The *Yizkor* memorial prayer is recited on the last day of Pesach, on Shavuot, on Yom Kippur, and on Shemini Atzeret. Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are considered to be one Festival in this matter, and therefore *Yizkor* is said only on Yom Kippur. This prayer is considered to be of greater significance on Yom Kippur than on the other Festivals, for the very essence of the day is the quest for mercy, forgiveness, and atonement, which are said to be as necessary for the departed as for the living. Although the verse (Tehillim/Psalms 88:6) states: Among the dead, there is freedom, which the Sages (Shabbat 30a) explained: “*When a person dies, he becomes free from [the obligation to fulfill] Torah and mitzvot,*” it is said that the departed nevertheless derive merit from charity that their children give on behalf of their souls. The Sages (Sifri to Devarim/Deuteronomy 21) derived this from the verse: *Grant atonement for Your nation Israel that You have redeemed;* the words *Grant atonement* refer to the living, while the words *that You have redeemed* refer to the departed.

This teaches us that the departed require atonement. How do they achieve atonement? Through the prayers and charity of the living on their behalf. Moreover, if the parents lived righteously and taught their children to pray, to fulfill mitzvot, and give charity, the fact that their children continue to do so after they have departed shows that the parents still exercise influence over their children, the parents’ strength endures through the children’s deeds, and it is as if they themselves were still living and practicing the mitzvot.

It is the Ashkenazic custom that one whose parents are both alive should leave the synagogue during *Yizkor*, for remaining inside might arouse the envy of those who have lost their parents. Another reason is that he might inadvertently join the congregation in the prayers recalling the memory of those who have passed away and doing so would be like inviting the Satan to act. A third reason is that it is not fitting that one remain silent while others are praying.

In Sephardic congregations, the custom is for everyone to remain in the synagogue. The cantor alone recites *Yizkor*, and each individual gives him the names of his own deceased to be included in the collective prayer. Furthermore, the Sephardic custom is to recite the memorial prayer on every Shabbat and Festival.

Rabbi Maurice Lamm, The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning

Recalling the deceased during a synagogue service is not merely a convenient form of emotional release, but an act of solemn piety and an expression of profound respect. The *yizkor* memorial service was instituted so that the Jew may pay homage to his forbears and recall the good life and traditional goals.

This memorial service is founded on a vital principle of Jewish life, one that motivates and animates the Kaddish recitation. It is based on the firm belief that the living, by acts of piety and goodness, can redeem the dead. The son can bring honor to the

father. The “merit of the children” can reflect the value of the parents. This merit is achieved, primarily, by living on a high ethical and moral plane, by being responsive to the demands of God and sensitive to the needs of fellowman. The formal expression of this merit is accomplished by prayer to God and by contributions to charity.

It is understandable, therefore, that when the yizkor was first introduced into the service, probably during the massacres of the Crusaders and the early medieval pogroms, it was natural to be recited during the Day of Atonement. On that holiest day of the year, when Jews seek redemption from their sins, they seek atonement as well for members of the family who have passed on. “Forgive Thy people, whom Thou hast redeemed,” says the Bible in Judges, chapter 21. Say the sages: “Forgive Thy people,” refers to the living; “Whom Thou hast redeemed,” refers to the dead. The living can redeem the dead. Atonement must be sought for both. One scholar even suggests that the term Yom Ha’Kippurim, the technical name for the Day of Atonement, is written in the plural, “atonements,” because on that day the Jew must seek atonement for both those who are present and those who sleep in the dust.

But even prayer is not sufficient for a dignified and meaningful memorial. It must be accompanied by charity, as the personal, material demonstration of kindness. Thus, yizkor came to be recited on major holidays when Deuteronomy 15-16 is read, and which contains the phrase, “Each man shall give according to his ability.” Those chapters command man to be charitable, to support the poor, the orphan, the widow, and the Levites who depend on his graciousness. They emphasize that on the three pilgrim festivals of Passover, Shavuot and Succot, no man may appear at the Temple empty-handed. Each man must be generous according to his ability. Accordingly, the proper memorial service contains a phrase denoting a sum of charity that is being pledged. This statement should not be taken lightly; it is not a mere liturgical formula. If no charity will be given it should not be included. It is preferable not to promise [rather] than to renege on a vow. Thus, the yizkor service recited on Yom Kippur, Passover, Shavuot and Succot, includes both prayer and charity.

The Rubric of the Memorial Service

There are two distinct prayers that are traditionally referred to as hazkarat neshamot, recalling of the dead. First is the malei rachamim, recited by the rabbi or cantor publicly at funeral and unveiling services, at holiday yizkor services, and after the Torah readings on Monday and Thursday mornings, and on Saturday afternoons for yahrzeit (anniversary of the death of a close relative). The second hazkarat neshamot prayer refers to the synagogue yizkor service. This is designed to be read by the individual congregant, silently, on Yom Kippur and the three pilgrim festivals, mentioned above.

One general yizkor prayer may be recited for all one’s deceased, citing the individual

names in the spaces indicated. Or, one prayer may be recited for each deceased, if so desired, or separate paragraphs for males and females. One must be sure that the Hebrew text is worded in the plural or singular, male or female. Prayerbooks usually indicate whom the yizkor paragraph is intended for. The yizkor may be read in translation.

The name should be recited in Hebrew, giving both the name of the deceased and the name of the deceased's father. The Sephardic tradition uses the mother's name instead of the father's, as, for example, Shmu'el ben Channah. The bereaved should learn and remember these names. If they are absolutely not ascertainable, the English names may be used.

For Whom Yizkor Is Recited

Yizkor may be said for all Jewish dead: parents, grandparents, mates, children, family and friends. It may be recited for suicides and for sinners. A question of propriety usually arises regarding yizkor for a deceased first mate after remarriage. The only reason it would not be said is the hurt it might cause the present mate. Being that the yizkor is recited silently, there can be no such fear and the prayer may be recited.

When Is Yizkor Recited?

Yizkor is recited after the morning Torah reading on Yom Kippur, on the last day of Passover and Shavuot, and on the seventh day of Succot, called Shemini Atzeret. It is recited on these days even if they fall on the Sabbath, at which time memorials are, otherwise, inappropriate to the festive nature of the holiday. In most synagogues it is recited after the rabbi's sermon.

The Requirement of a Minyan

Yizkor should be recited at synagogue services. If one cannot possibly attend these services because of illness, or because there is no minyan available, one may recite yizkor privately at home, although it is distinctly and unquestionably preferable to recite it at a public synagogue service. In this respect, it is unlike the Kaddish which may not be recited privately, under any circumstances.

Candle Lighting for Yizkor

It is an ancient custom, on the four holidays when yizkor is recited, to kindle yahrzeit candles for the departed [prior to the onset of the holiday]. It is best that the lights be flaming wicks, as the flame and candle symbolize the relation of body and soul. For yizkor memorial purposes, one light will serve adequately to recall all the departed.

Rabbi Yosef Y. Jacobson, My First Yizkor – A Story, from Chabad.org

For the first 33 years of my life I was lucky enough to be expelled from the synagogue during yizkor services, when congregants pray for the souls of loved ones who have passed on, and those with both parents alive leave the synagogue.

I never probed the reason for this custom. As a child, even as an adult, I was happy to be legally expelled from the synagogue, to catch a fresh breath of air and enjoy a schmooze with a fellow yizkor-evacuee. As children, it often meant that my friends and I could return an hour or two later without our fathers getting angry.

All of that changed this year for me. My father, a pioneer of the Yiddish press in America, died at 70. Two weeks later came the Jewish holiday of Shavuot, when we commemorate the giving of the Torah at Sinai. It is also a day when synagogues throughout the world hold yizkor services.

When it became time for yizkor, more than half the people in the synagogue left. The sacred Torah scroll was brought to the center of the room. The *gabbai* (synagogue manager) gave a knock on the table to signify that the yizkor service would now begin.

Suddenly, an eerie silence filled the room. A sense of mystery, awe and dormant pain surfaced. You could cut the rawness of the emotions with a knife. Something profoundly authentic united all those standing in the room.

My heart shifted to my late father, whom I loved and adored so deeply. My flow of tears found solace in the knowledge that his was a life well lived. My dad was a man who utilized his journalistic wisdom and skills to become a voice for causes others left behind; he was a man of conviction, and a truly original personality. I recalled my father's last hours and the dignity with which he departed on his final journey. And I wept for my children who would not have the privilege to know the unique grandfather they had.

I lifted my eyes and gazed around at the people in the room. Near me stood a young man, my age, who had lost his mother at the tender age of 5. Life without yizkor was inconceivable to him. Near him, stood others who lost parents in their teens or in college and needed to struggle to fill the un-fillable void. Then there were the older men, in their 70s and 80s, whose parents perished more than six decades earlier in Stalin's gulag or Hitler's crematoriums. They are in a class of their own. Then, of course, there were the majority of middle-aged worshippers who at some point in their lives were forced to confront the reality of loss.

A strange oneness pervaded all of us standing in that room during yizkor. The connection did not need to be articulated in words; you could see it when you peered into the eyes of the person standing near you. It took me some time till I put my finger on what that connection consisted of: A piece of each of us was not to be found any longer in this world. An integral part of each of our hearts was elsewhere.

I understood why for 33 years I was asked to leave the synagogue during yizkor. Life for those who stay behind in the synagogue has a very different meaning, one that cannot be shared by those who had not experienced the loss of a loved one.

This Yom Kippur I will again stand in the synagogue during yizkor. I will think of my Dad, which will make me both laugh and cry at the same time. I will ask him to look out for me and my family. And I will pray that I merit to internalize my beloved father's zest for life and for truth.

Section IV. The Mussaf Service (AS: pp. 486-625)

Part A. Unetaneh Tokef (AS: pp. 530-535)

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *The Koren Rosh Hashanah Machzor*, pp. 564-567 – Unetaneh Tokef is divided into four movements: the scene, the stakes, the eternal Jewish hope, and the frailty of life.

No prayer more powerfully defines the image of the Days of Awe than does *Unetaneh Tokef*. The language is simple, the imagery strong, the rhythms insistent and the drama intense.

It is structured in four movements. The first sets the scene. The heavenly court is assembled. God sits in the seat of judgment. The angels tremble. Before Him is the book of all our deeds. In it our lives are written, bearing our signature, and we await the verdict.

The second defines what is at stake: Who will live, who will die? Who will flourish, who will suffer, who will be at ease, who will be in torment? Between now and Yom Kippur our fate is being decided on high.

Then comes the great outburst of faith that defines Judaism as a religion of hope. No fate is final. Repentance, prayer and charity can avert the evil decree. Life is not a script written by Aeschylus or Sophocles in which tragedy is inexorable. God forgives; God pardons; God exercises clemency – if we truly repent and pray and give to others.

Finally, there is a moving reflection on the fragility of human life and the eternity of God. We are no more than a fragment of pottery, a blade of grass, a flower that fades, a shadow, a cloud, a breath of wind. Dust we are, and to dust we return. But God is life forever. By attaching ourselves to Him we may [attach ourselves to Infinity].

The Story of Rabbi Amnon of Mainz

Background to Unetaneh Tokef from www.ou.org

The prayer entitled “Unetaneh Tokef” is attributed to a Rabbi Amnon of Mainz, Germany, who lived about one thousand years ago. The story behind this *piyut*, a prayer-poem, is sad and poignant, and may shed light on the prayer itself.

The Bishop of Mainz summoned Rabbi Amnon, a great Torah scholar, to his court and offered him a ministerial post on the condition that Rabbi Amnon would convert to Christianity. Rabbi Amnon refused. The Bishop insisted and continued to press Rabbi Amnon to accept his offer. Of course, Rabbi Amnon continued to refuse. One day, however, Rabbi Amnon asked the Bishop for three days to consider his offer.

As soon as Rabbi Amnon returned home, he was distraught at the terrible mistake he had made of even appearing to consider the Bishop’s offer and the betrayal to G-d. For three days he could not eat or sleep, and he prayed to G-d for forgiveness. When the deadline for the decision arrived, the Bishop sent messenger after messenger to bring Rabbi Amnon, but he refused to go. Finally, the Bishop had him forcibly brought to him and demanded a response. The Rabbi responded, “I should have my tongue cut out for not having refused immediately.” The Bishop angrily had Rabbi Amnon’s hands and feet cut off and then sent him home.

A few days later was Rosh HaShanah, and Rabbi Amnon, dying from his wounds, asked to be carried to shul. He wished to say the Kedushah to sanctify G-d’s Name and publicly declare his faith in G-d’s Kingship. With his dying breath, he uttered the words that we now know of as the U’netaneh Tokef.

Three days later, Rabbi Amnon appeared in a dream to Rabbi Kalonymous ben Meshullam, a scholar and poet, and taught him the exact text of the prayer. Rabbi Amnon asked that it be sent to all Jewry and that it be inserted in the prayers of Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur for all time.

The prayer portrays G-d as a Shepherd over His flock, counting and examining each sheep one by one as it passes under His rod. So does He review the flock of humanity one by one, determining each individual’s fate for the coming year.

But the individual human being is not just a helpless sheep! Rather, he or she can contribute to their verdict by altering their behavior towards G-d and Man, specifically in the areas of sincere Repentance, Prayer from the heart and Charity given with a cheerful spirit.

Kivnei Maron - Like Sheep

Talmud Bavli, Rosh HaShanah 18a with Rashi – There are three possible definitions for *Bnei Maron*.

What is meant by the expression “*Bnei Maron*”? Here it was translated as “*Bnei Amarna*.” Reish Lakish explained, “Like the heights of the House of Maron.” Rav Yehudah said in the name of Shmuel, “Like the soldiers of the House of David.” Rabba Bar Bar Chana said in the name of Rabbi Yochanan, “All of them are judged at the same time.”

“Like *Bnei Amarna*.” Like sheep counted for tithing, filing past in single file through a small opening, two cannot fit through together.

“Like the heights of the House of Maron” – where there is a narrow path, and there is not enough room for two people to travel alongside one another, and there is a steep valley on either side of the path.

“Like the soldiers of the House of David” – “Like *Bnei Maron*,” i.e. like soldiers in the king’s army. Maron is an expression of mastery and lordship; such is the way one counts soldiers as they march out to battle one after the other.

Teshuvah, Tefillah, Tzedakah

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, The Koren Rosh HaShanah Machzor, p. 811 – How do we define Teshuvah, Tefillah, and Tzedakah?

Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the Lubavitcher Rebbe, pointed out that the usual translation of these words is inaccurate. *Teshuvah* does not mean penitence; *Tefillah* does not mean prayer; *Tzedakah* does not mean charity. The word for penitence in Hebrew is *harata*, meaning remorse for the wrong we have done. *Teshuvah* means return. It tells us that every sin is a form of being lost; we are not where we are meant to be. *Teshuvah* means coming home.

The word for prayer, in the sense of request, is *bakasha*. *Tefillah* comes from the verb meaning “to judge.” *Lehitpalel* means “to judge oneself.” In *tefillah* we are both subject and object, the doer and the judge of what we do. It is this capacity for self-judgment that makes us capable of moral growth.

The word for charity is *gemilut chasadim*. *Tzedakah* means justice, or justice and charity combined. There is no word for this in English. In Judaism we give, not out of charity but out of justice.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, “God’s Alarm Clock,” from aish.com – Relating to ourselves, others, and God.

Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur are when we number our days. Asking to be

written in the book of life, we think about life and how we use it. In this context the three key words of the “*Unetaneh Tokef*” prayer are fundamental: *teshuvah* (repentance), *tefillah* (prayer) and *tzedakah* (charity). *Teshuvah* is about our relationship with ourself. *Tefillah* is about our relationship with God. *Tzedakah* is about our relationship with other people.

Teshuvah means not only “repentance” but also “returning” – to our roots, our faith, our people’s history and our vocation as heirs to those who stood at Sinai more than 3,000 years ago. *Teshuvah* asks us: Did we grow in the past year or did we stand still? Did we study the texts of our heritage? Did we keep one more mitzvah? Did we live fully and confidently as Jews? *Teshuvah* is our satellite navigation system giving us a direction in life.

Tefillah means prayer. It is our conversation with God. We speak, but if we are wise we also listen, to the voice of God as refracted through the prayers of a hundred generations of our ancestors. *Tefillah* is less about asking God for what we want, more about asking God to teach us what to want. A new car? A better job? An exotic holiday? Our prayers do not speak about these things because life is about more than these things. It is less about what we own than about what we do and who we aspire to be. We speak about forgiveness and about God’s presence in our lives. We remind ourselves that, short though our time on earth is, by connecting with God we touch eternity. *Tefillah* is our “mobile phone to heaven.”

Tzedakah is about the good we do for others. Sir Moses Montefiore was one of the great figures of Victorian Jewry. He was a wealthy man and devoted much of his long life to serving the Jewish people in Britain and worldwide (he built the windmill in Jerusalem, and the area of which it is a part – Yemin Moshe – is named after him). Someone once asked him how much he was worth, and he gave him a figure. “But,” said the questioner, “I know you own more than that.” “You didn’t ask me what I own but what I am worth. The figure I gave you was how much money I have given this year to charity, because we are worth what we are willing to share with others.” That is *tzedakah*.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *The Koren Rosh Hashanah Machzor*, p. 811 – Judaism has a message of hope.

Avert the evil of the decree. In these four Hebrew words lies the difference between a hope culture and a tragic culture. In ancient Greece, there was a belief that once a decree had been sealed there was no way of averting it. Every act taken to frustrate it merely brought it closer to fulfillment. That forms the heart of the tragedy of Oedipus and Laius.

In Judaism every decree can be averted by sincere repentance. That is the significance of the story of Yonah and the people of Nineveh. Yonah came and announced the decree: In forty days Nineveh will be destroyed. But the people repented, and the

decree was annulled. There is no fate that is final, no destiny that cannot be changed. Therefore, there is always hope. Greece gave the world its greatest tragedies, those of Sophocles, Aeschylus and Euripides. Israel was and remains the supreme culture of hope.

A Story about Tzedakah

Jonathan Rosenblum, Think Again: Why we weep for Rabbi Nosson Tzvi Finkel, from www.jpost.com (Nov. 25, 2011) – The founder of Starbucks learns a lesson in Tzedakah.

Howard Schultz, the founder of Starbucks, was once brought to see the dean of the Mir Yeshiva in Jerusalem, Rabbi Nosson Tzvi Finkel, along with a group of prominent businessmen. They had not been told of his Parkinson's, and instinctively averted their eyes when he entered the room. Soon they heard a bang on the table and Rav Nosson Tzvi commanded them, "Look at me."

"I know you are all busy men," he continued, "so I'll be brief. What is the most important lesson of the Holocaust?"

He proceeded to describe the situation of the Jews arriving in Auschwitz and other death camps, after having been packed into cattle cars for days, without water or facilities of any kind, and then being separated from their loved ones. When the lucky ones reached a barracks, they were given one blanket for six people. They could choose to share it or each one could try to grab it for himself.

They chose the former. "The greatest lesson of the Holocaust," he concluded, "is the triumph of the human spirit. Now, each of you return to America and share your blanket with five others."

Part B. The Service of the High Priest (AS: pp. 554-575)

In the repetition of Mussaf by the *chazzan*, we relate the service that the High Priest would perform on Yom Kippur in the times of the Temple. In those times, the Jewish people would receive atonement through this service. Nowadays, since the Temple no longer exists, retelling the service of the High Priest on Yom Kippur can contribute to our atonement.

Rabbi Mordechai Becher, Gateway to Judaism, p. 138 – Recounting the *Avodah*, the service of the High Priest in the Temple on Yom Kippur.

The Mussaf (Additional Service) of Yom Kippur morning describes the drama and significance of the High Priest's service in the Jerusalem Temple on Yom Kippur. The High Priest would enter the Holy of Holies, the innermost sanctum of the Temple only once a year, on Yom Kippur. There he would pray for the Jewish people's forgiveness and bring special offerings and incense. Mussaf describes the details of this service and the fervent prayers that the High Priest and the people recited while it was performed.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, The Koren Yom Kippur Machzor, pp. 878-9 – We recreate the scene of the High Priest’s Service.

There now follows a unique feature of the Yom Kippur prayers: a narrative retelling of the order of service as it took place in the Temple. Every Mussaf Amidah contains a specific reference to the sacrifice of the day, but only here are we invited to re-envision it as it happened.

The service in the Temple on Yom Kippur was unique, the dramatic high point of the Jewish year. On the holiest day the holiest person, the High Priest, would enter the Holy of Holies and, with the holiest name of God on his lips, atone for the sins of all Israel. It was a supremely emotive moment, an entire nation confronting its faults, confessing its failings, and turning to God as its Source of forgiveness and hope: a nation focused on the service of one man, the Kohen Gadol, who prayed and confessed on their behalf.

For close to two thousand years we have not had the Temple, nor High Priest, nor sacrifice. That the Jewish people survived as a people, that Judaism survived as a faith, and that Yom Kippur survived in the absence of so much of what constituted the service of the day, are three of the more remarkable stories in human history. In effect, the sages said: in place of sacrifice, we have prayer. In place of the Temple we have the synagogue. In place of the service of the High Priest we have the service of each of us, turning to God, confessing our sins, committing ourselves to a different and better future, offering God our heart.

We no longer have the Temple ceremony, but we have the story; and we have the day itself, which atones even in the absence of the Temple. So on this day of days, more vividly than at any other time, the synagogue becomes a fragment of the Temple, and we re-create in our minds the scene that took place then on this holiest of days.

Insights

Sefer HaChinuch, Mitzvah #364 – In absence of the Temple, the Altar, and the *Seir HaMishtaleach*, the only tool we have is teshuvah.

Our Sages said that the *Seir HaMishtaleach* (scapegoat) brought atonement when one did teshuvah for all sins that were light or serious; purposeful or accidental; whether known or unknown ...

And now that, because of our sins, we do not have a Temple or an Altar to atone for us, we only have teshuvah. Teshuvah atones for all sins; even if one had been entirely evil his whole life, but completely repents even at the end of it, his evil ways are no longer mentioned.

Rabbi Avi Shafran, The Scapegoat, from www.aish.com – The scapegoat is symbolic of the meaningless existence.

One of the most remarkable elements of Yom Kippur in ancient times, when the Holy Temple stood in Jerusalem, was the ritual of “the Two Goats.”

Two indistinguishable members of that species were brought before the High Priest, who placed a randomly-pulled lot on the head of each animal. One lot read “to God” and the other “to Azazel” – the name of a steep cliff in a barren desert.

As the Torah prescribes, the first goat was solemnly sacrificed in the Temple, attention given to every detail of the offering; the second was taken to the cliff and thrown off, dying unceremoniously before even reaching the bottom.

Some moderns might find the fates of both goats troubling, but there are depths to Jewish rituals of which they don’t dream.

I lay no claim to conversance with those truly deep meanings. But pondering the “two goats” ritual before Yom Kippur (and anticipating its recollection during the day’s prayer-service), a thought occurs, and it may bear particular import for our times.

There are two ways to view human life, as mutually exclusive as they are fundamental. Our existence is either a result of intent, or of accident. And a corollary follows directly: Either our lives are meaningful, or they are not.

If the roots of our existence ultimately lie in pure randomness, there can be no more meaning to good and bad actions than to good or bad movies; no more import to right and wrong than to right and left. Human beings remain but evolved animals, their Mother Therasas and Adolf Hitlers alike.

To be sure, we might conceive a rationale for establishing societal norms, but a social contract is only a practical tool, not a moral imperative; it is, in the end, artificial. Only if there is a Creator in the larger picture can there be ultimate import to human life, placing it on a plane meaningfully above that of mosquitoes.

The Torah, of course, is based on the foundation – and in fact begins with an account – of a Divinely directed creation; and its most basic message is the meaningfulness of human life. Most of us harbor a similar, innate conviction.

Yet some resist that innate feeling, and adopt the perspective that what we can perceive with our physical senses is all that there is in the end. The apparent randomness of nature, in that approach, leaves no place for Divinity. It is not a difficult position to maintain; the Creator may be well evident to those of us primed to perceive Him, but He has not left clear fingerprints on His Creation.

Might those two diametric worldviews be somehow reflected in the Yom Kippur ritual?

The goat that becomes a sacrifice on the Temple altar might symbolize recognition of the idea that humans are beholden to something greater. And the counter-goat, which finds its fate in a desolate, unholy place, would then allude to the perspective of life as pointless, lacking higher purpose or meaning.

Ibid. – The scapegoat carries away the “sins of the people,” because sin is rooted in the philosophy of meaninglessness that the goat represents.

If, indeed, the Azazel-goat alludes to the mindset of meaninglessness, we might approach an understanding of the inspiration born of its dispatching. The animal's being “laden with the sins” of the people might refer to the recognition that sin stems from insufficient recognition of how meaningful in fact our lives are. The Talmudic rabbi Resh Lakish in fact said as much when he observed that “A person does not sin unless a spirit of madness enters him” [Sotah 3a].

And so the sending off of the Azazel-goat could be seen as an acknowledgement of the idea that sin's roots lie in the madness born of our self-doubt. And those who witnessed its dispatching might well have been spurred by that thought to then turn and consider the other goat, the one sacrificed in dedication to God. So stirred on the holiest day of the Jewish year, they might then have been able to better commit themselves to re-embracing the grand meaningfulness that is a human life.

We may lack the Two Goats ritual today, but we can certainly try all the same to absorb that eternally timely thought.

Based on Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch, Vayikra 16:10 – Great symbolism lies within the service of the Two Goats.

Here is the representation of two creatures, originally completely identical, which proceed on two entirely contrasting paths. Both are placed together in a similar way before God at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting. The decision whether to go “toward God” or to go to “Azazel” hovers over both of them in exactly the same way. Their fate through lottery is decided based on what is fitting for them. The one designated “toward God” gets admitted to the Holy of Holies, where the ideal of a Jewish Torah life perfects itself as the bearer of Godliness on earth. The other, designated for Azazel, remains untouched, at the entrance of the Sanctuary, and is sent out of its precincts, away from the sphere of human habitation into the desert. Having turned its back on the Sanctuary, it ends the uncultivated living it had preserved for itself.

Each one of us is a “*seir*” (goat). Each of us has the power to resist the demands made on our will power. It is in the way we use this power that the worthiness or worthlessness of our moral existence depends. We can use it in attachment to God in resisting all internal and external temptation and considerations to become a *seir* to God. Or we can use it in obstinate refusal of God and His holy laws of morality.

This latter recourse is reflected in the etymology of the term לעזאזל – using one’s strength for obstinacy (עז) for no meaningful future (אזל).

Bowing During the Service

Rabbi Eliyahu Kitov, The Book of Our Heritage, Vol. I, pp. 99-100 – In Temple times, bowing took place amid a miracle.

Fortunate was the eye which beheld all these things (that happened during the Yom Kippur service of the High Priest)! The masses of people who stood waiting in the courtyard (for the *Kohen Gadol*/High Priest to complete his service) were said to be like angels, no longer subject to the needs of mortal men. They were not weakened by their hours of standing, nor did they feel the crush of the tremendous, crowded mass. Their standing in the courtyard during the *Kohen Gadol’s Avodah* (Service) was, as it were, their own simultaneous Avodah and prayer, thus sustaining them in body and soul.

They were all witnesses to a great miracle, for when the *kohanim* and all the people heard the Divine Name pronounced by the *Kohen Gadol*, they would kneel, bow, fall upon their faces, crying: “Blessed be the Name of His glorious majesty for eternity,” and confess their personal sins. Despite the enormous density of the crowds gathered there, each person had four *amos* (six to eight feet) of empty space around him so that no one could overhear the confessions of another.

As the people were thus prostrating themselves, the *Kohen Gadol* would prolong his pronunciation of the Divine Name with a chant so that he would conclude its pronouncement as they finished their confession. When they would stand after having finished their confession, he would speak the final words of the verse that he was reciting and would declare: You shall be purified.

Section V. The Minchah Service (AS: pp. 626-705)

Part A. Torah Reading (AS: pp. 630-635)

During Minchah we read about the forbidden relationships. Why, on the holiest day of the year, when we are focused on spiritual ideals, do we read this portion?

Rabbi Eliyahu Kitov, The Book of Our Heritage, Vol. I, pp. 89-90 – Why do we read the *arayot* (forbidden relationships) on Yom Kippur?

A wise man once explained that the reason this portion was chosen for the Torah reading on Yom Kippur [at Minchah] is to remind us that even though we sanctify ourselves, we should never be so complacent as to assume that we have managed to completely safeguard ourselves from falling prey to the most debased and vile

inclinations. It is towards the end of Yom Kippur, when the nation has achieved a level of purity of thought and deed that is unmatched throughout the year, that this very Torah portion is read. This serves as a reminder to all that man cannot relent for a moment in his battle against the enemy that lurks in his heart, who seeks to cause him to stumble, with all that is shameful.

Rabbi Frand on the Parsha, Vol. I, pp. 22-23 – Even at the most sublime moments we need to be reminded of our basic humanity.

When it came to choosing a name for himself, Adam seems to have been strangely uninspired. He chose the name Adam, because he had been formed from the *adamah*, the earth. A human being is the pinnacle of creation, the highest form of living being, spiritual, intellectual, creative, complex, profound, and formed, as it were, in “the image of the Lord.”

How then can it be that Adam, with all his insight and perception, could find no better definition of a human being than that he had been formed from the earth?

The Alter of Slobodka explains that, quite to the contrary, Adam’s choice of a name for himself showed his greatest insight. Man represents the ultimate paradox in creation. On the one hand, he is such a sublime creature, higher than the angels, capable of reaching the most transcendent levels of spirituality. And yet, at the same time, he is so painfully human, so incredibly frail. With one slight misstep, he can plummet from the highest pinnacle to the abyss. He can easily fall to the level of the humble dust from which he was originally formed.

This is a critical aspect of the human condition, one that man must always keep in sight and mind if he is to be successful on this earth. Therefore, the choice of the name Adam to recall the *adamah* from which he was taken touches on the very essence of a human being. He had the wisdom to recognize that man can never declare, “I am beyond temptation.” No matter how high he has risen, man is never far from the earth from which he was formed. Until the very end, man can always plunge to rock bottom. Ultimately, this lifelong struggle defines the greatness of mankind.

We find the same dichotomy on Yom Kippur. For the morning Torah reading, our Sages chose selections describing the divine service of the Kohen Gadol in the Sanctuary and the Holy of Holies. As we read these words, we are transported to the holiest place in the universe on the holiest day of the year. And yet, a few hours later, the Torah reading during Mincha enumerates the prohibitions against illicit libidinous encounters.

Is this what we need to hear on Yom Kippur after spending so many hours in fasting and prayer? Is this what we need to contemplate in our exalted condition during the waning hours of the day as Yom Kippur draws to a close? Why did our Sages choose this particular reading for us on the holiest afternoon of the year?

The answer is that Yom Kippur of all days is exactly when we need to hear this. On Yom Kippur, we allow neither food nor water to pass our lips, and we ascend into the heavens on wings of prayer. Ethereal spirits with but a tentative connection to the physical world, we reach for the highest, soaring above the angels, creatures of pure spirit. Therefore, our Sages remind us that even in our moments of greatest inspiration we are still human and capable of falling prey to our baser desires. They make us aware that we invite disaster if we ever lose sight of the abyss that stretches before us.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *The Koren Yom Kippur Machzor* pp. 992-997 – Judaism teaches that holiness is intimately connected with sexuality.

Why the contrast with the behavior of the Egyptians and the Canaanites? Why are sexual sins so serious as to warrant the exile of Israel from its land?

Abraham and Sarah introduced (or reintroduced) a unique form of religious life, “Abrahamic monotheism,” as contrasted with the idolatry of the pagan world. But this is not a dominant theme of the narratives of Genesis. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob engage in no critique of idolatry. In this they are quite unlike the later prophets from Moses to Malachi for whom it was central. A famous rabbinic tradition states that Abraham was an iconoclast who broke his father’s idols, yet this is not mentioned explicitly in Genesis. Abraham’s family live among idolaters, sometimes make treaties with them, even pray for them, yet they do not overtly criticize their religion, or call on them to relinquish it. Wherein lies the difference between the life of the Abrahamic covenant and that of the peoples among whom they dwell? One theme emerges repeatedly and consistently: sexual ethics. Twice Abraham, and once Isaac, forced to leave home because of famine, fear that their lives will be in danger because they are married to beautiful women. They believe they are at risk of being killed so that Sarah or Rebecca can be taken into the local ruler’s harem. When two angels visit Lot in Sodom, the inhabitants of the town surround Lot’s house, demanding that he hand over the visitors so that they can be sexually assaulted. When Dina, Jacob’s daughter, goes out to visit the women of Shekhem, she is abducted, raped, and held hostage by a local prince who has formed a passionate attachment to her. Joseph, a slave in Egypt, catches the eye of his master Potiphar’s wife who attempts to seduce him and when he refuses, accuses him of rape.

The appearance of these six stories cannot be merely incidental in so highly structured a text. The implication is bold and surprising. *The fundamental difference between the life of the Abrahamic covenant and that of pagan societies is the presence in one, and the absence in the other, of a sexual ethic: an ethic of the sanctity of marriage and of sexual fidelity.* Nor is it accidental that the sign of the Abrahamic covenant, Brit Milah, is circumcision. The sign of holiness is intimately connected with sexuality.

Ibid. – Holiness is expressed in our most intimate relationships within the family.

Sexuality is a fundamental theme of ancient myth. There were male gods of power and potency and female goddesses of fertility and allure, and the relations between them were amoral. They fought, conquered, schemed, sired. Often they killed one another; at times they killed their own children. It was a world of conflict and betrayal, of sexual lawlessness and anomie (or lack of social norms).

Judaism was and is opposed to this world, whether in its ancient forms of myth, or its more modern pseudo-scientific or philosophical counterparts, the neo-Darwinian myth (the “selfish gene”) that the fundamental driver of behavior is the desire to hand on one’s genes to the next generation, or the Nietzschean “will to power.”

Against this, Judaism sets forth an ethic of love and loyalty, concretized in the idea of covenant, whereby two parties, each respecting the integrity of the other, come together in a bond of mutual commitment and fidelity. The human counterpart of the covenant between God and humanity is marriage as a covenant between husband and wife.

A sexual ethic is therefore not just one among many features of Judaism. It is of its essence, for there is the closest possible connection between the way we relate to God and the way we relate to those to whom we are closest: our husband or wife, and our children. That is why Genesis, the story of our beginnings, deals only cursorily with the creation of the universe, and briefly with politics (a key theme of Exodus and Deuteronomy). Instead, it is a series of narratives about families, marriage partners, parents, children, and siblings.

One of the signs of a polytheistic or atheistic culture – where people believe that there are many gods or none – is the absence, subjectivity or relativity of sexual ethics. Marriage is seen as one lifestyle among many. Adultery, infidelity, promiscuity, and sexual and child abuse are commonplace. Sexuality becomes the pursuit of desire. That is the world which Genesis contrasts with the life of the covenant. History supports this contention. Sexuality is often the primary force behind violence, and sexual decadence the first sign of civilizational decline.

So the Torah passage we read on Yom Kippur afternoon, despite its seeming remoteness from the themes of the day, is telling us a fundamental truth about Judaism as a whole. Holiness is expressed in our most intimate relationships within the family: in the love that is loyal and generous, self-sacrificing and kind, in the sensitivity of marriage partners to one another and their needs, and in our ability to recognize the integrity-of-otherness that lies at the heart of love.

Part B. The Book of Yonah (Jonah) (AS: pp. 634-645)

On Yom Kippur afternoon we read about the prophet Yonah, sent by God to admonish the non-Jewish people of Nineveh to do teshuvah. He initially attempted to run away from this mission, for he reasoned that they would indeed repent. The teshuvah of the non-Jews would reflect negatively on the Jewish people, who did not repent. To protect the image of his Jewish brethren, Yonah rejected God's command to travel to Nineveh.

Additionally, Yonah had another reason for disregarding God's orders. Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, which God describes as the "staff of My anger" (Yeshayahu/Isaiah 10:5). Yonah knew that Assyria would be used to punish the Jewish people – indeed, the Assyrians exiled the Ten Tribes – and he therefore did not wish to rebuke them. Instead, he wanted their "quota of sin to be filled," so that they would be destroyed and would not harm the Jewish people.

Talmud Bavli, Ta'anit 16a – The Book of Yonah teaches the importance of real change.

[At the time when the community gathers to do teshuvah] the eldest and wisest person says, "My brothers, your fasting and wearing sack cloth [a sign of teshuvah] will *not* cause God to turn around. Rather, your teshuvah and good deeds will be the cause. For example, regarding the people of Nineveh, the verse does *not* say, 'God saw their sack cloth and fasting,' rather it says, 'God saw their actions because they had returned from their evil ways' [Yonah 3:10]."

Rebbetzin Tziporah Heller, Jonah and the Whale from www.aish.com – Yonah faced a dilemma of listening to God versus defending the honor of the Jewish people.

Yonah is read on Yom Kippur, teaching us about our spiritual voyage. Yonah was a prophet who lived in the first Temple period. His first mission was given to him by the most famous of first Temple prophets, Elijah – he was to anoint Jehu as king in the year 705 BCE. His were stormy times; the Jewish people were trapped in a pattern of spiritual decline that ended with first the conquest and expulsion of the Ten Tribes by the Assyrians in 607 BCE, and finally with the destruction of Jerusalem, which was followed by 70 years of exile.

As a prophet, Yonah knew far better than we can imagine what the inevitable end would be if no transformation would take place. After the failure of his second mission, to rebuke Jehu's successor, Jeroboam, he was given his final mission. The mission that God gave him was one that he could not open his heart to accept. He was sent to the capital of Assyria, Nineveh, to urge its population to repent. How bizarre the assignment sounded to him! His own people were falling uncontrollably into a chasm that seemed to have no bottom, yet he was sent to save others – the archenemies of Israel!

Yonah actually dreaded the success of this mission far more than he dreaded failure. How could he bear to witness the contrast of the Assyrians returning to God in the face of his prophecy, with the Jews stubbornly resisting any chance for spiritual self-preservation? Therefore, he attempted to escape from his destiny...

The whale spit Yonah out at the shores of Nineveh. He told the residents of Nineveh what awaited them: In forty days they could either make radical changes in their lives, or the city would be destroyed by God's wrath. The changes in Nineveh happened with speed and drama. The king himself led the people into a total reformation. Nineveh's destruction was postponed for 40 years.

Everything that Yonah had feared had come to pass. The contrast that he dreaded was more vivid in reality than it was as a prophecy. He had only one further request – that he be spared of seeing the destruction of his own people, which he knew would come eventually and at the hands of the Assyrians at that. The fact that the Jews would not take example from Nineveh would be the final act of callousness that would seal their fate.

Rabbi Meir Zlotowitz, Commentary on the Book of Yonah – Yonah fled the Land of Israel in order to diminish his own receptivity to prophecy.

Noam Elimelech comments homiletically that the Yonah, “dove” in Hebrew, is a bird which maintains an inviolable loyalty to its mate. The dove is used in parables of the Sages to symbolize Israel's loyalty to God. God says of Israel: “Unique is she, My constant dove” (Song of Songs 6:9).

Yonah the prophet is so named because he, too, represents total loyalty to God. His flight to the sea was not an effort to deny that bond or break it. Rather it was an attempt by Yonah to lessen his own receptivity to the spiritual heights of prophecy: on the sea and away from the Land of Israel, the spirit of prophecy does not rest on man.

Against that backdrop we can best appreciate the self-sacrifice of Yonah's flight. Only a prophet can appreciate the spiritual bliss of prophecy. To be worthy of such a state is beyond the dreams of even great people; Yonah was there and he chose to give it up in order not to shame Israel by the comparison of its stubbornness with the obedience of Nineveh to the warning of God's prophet. It was not from God's authority that he fled; had he not recognized God's sovereignty, there would have been no need to flee. His own country, tragically, was filled with people who refused to acknowledge the word of God.

They had no need to seek passage to Tarshish to evade the word of God; they flouted it in Samaria, in Judah, even in Jerusalem. Yonah fled because he was close, because he believed, because he was exalted. He fled not to diminish the Word of God, but to diminish his own receptivity to prophecy...

Rebbetzin Tziporah Heller, Jonah and the Whale from www.aish.com – In the belly of the whale, Yonah has a complete transformation as he realizes the extent of God's kindness.

Yonah fled from Israel by ship to silence the voice of prophecy that can only be heard in the Holy Land. But a storm at sea forced him into the recognition that no

one can escape from God. In the midst of calm waters, his boat was tossed in a tempest until it was on the verge of breaking. The sailors prayed to their gods. Yonah went to sleep. He knew the truth. It was he who had already cut himself off from God; there was nothing to say and nothing to pray for.

His apathetic behavior aroused the curiosity of the sailors. He told them his story. He believed in God, yet he was running away from Him.

Knowing he was the cause of the storm, he implored the sailors to toss him overboard so they could save themselves. As decent people they resisted this suggestion until the critical moment when it became clear that within seconds they would all die. At that point, they listened and threw him into the turbulent depths. The storm abated immediately. Yonah thought his story had ended.

But it had just begun. He was swallowed by a whale, and miraculously survived. In the dark fetid innards of the whale, he recognized what he had never truly been willing to see, in his most exalted moments of prophecy, God's intimate knowledge and care over each life and each moment. He was a prophet, and awareness of God was not a novelty to him. But recognition of the depths of God's mercy was. It was then that Yonah did teshuva – he repented, returning to God. Now he recognized that no matter how painful the contrast between the Assyrians and the Jews would be to him, that God's motivation could only be one of mercy. Once he recognized this truth, he was willing to open the gates that he had closed so resolutely – the gates of prayer. He was now ready for the most significant undertaking of his life.

Yom Kippur is the day in which each one of us can relive Yonah's journey. Let us finally move towards whatever the next step is for us in fulfilling the mission for which we were created. Let us use the time to return to God with joy and love.

Based on Rabbi Frand on the Parsha, Vol. II, ArtScroll Publishers, pp. 24-26 – Yonah defined himself foremost as a Jew – do we?

One of the more memorable parts of the Yom Kippur davening is the reading of the Book of Yonah during the afternoon Minchah service. We read that the Tarshish-bound ship that Yonah had boarded was being lashed by a storm, and the ship was on the verge of breaking apart. The passengers and crew cast lots to ascertain who was responsible for their predicament. When the lots singled out Yonah as the culprit, they asked him, "What is your trade? And from where do you come? What is your land? And from what people are you?"

Yonah's reply seems to answer only some of their questions but not others. All he says is, "I am a Hebrew (a Jew), and I fear God."

On a deeper level, however, Yonah's response really did answer all of their questions. The people on the boat wanted Yonah to define himself, to describe who he was – and so he did. He was a God-fearing Jew. Period.

There is a certain misconception commonplace in today's day and age. There is nothing wrong with going out and making a living, but do we think of ourselves as doctors or lawyers first, or rather primarily as Jews? If you had to characterize yourself in one word, would you choose "accountant" or "Jew"?

Yonah's response should penetrate into our hearts, until we likewise respond to such questions with similar words. Who are we? We are Jews.

With the numerous distractions of the complex world we live in, the way to rise to the challenge is to define ourselves. This requires us to make sure our priorities are in order, and to make sure that we are clearly aware of who we are, first and foremost.

The story of Yonah teaches us that we cannot hide from our mission in life. The world needs us.

Vilna Gaon, Aderet Eliyahu, Yonah 1:1 – The message for Nineveh was also intended for the Jewish people.

Everything God said to Yonah was then communicated to the Jewish nation so that each person would know why he was brought into this world: his purpose was to perfect himself and the whole world.

The Gaon of Vilna interprets the book of Yonah as a metaphor for our mission in life. Thus, the book of Yonah is highly relevant to the essence of the day of Yom Kippur.

Ibid. 1:3 – The prophecy of Yonah is a metaphor for our mission in life.

"Yonah found a boat heading for Tarshish." This world is compared to the ocean. The World to Come and the Garden of Eden are compared to the dry land. One who sets sail on the sea does not intend to sail forever; the goal is to transport goods to the dry land.

This world is compared to the ocean, and the challenges we encounter are the waves. Our bodies are compared to the ship and through it we cross the ocean. So too, in this world our bodies contain our soul which we bring to the World to Come.

Rebbetzin Tziporah Heller, Jonah and the Whale from www.aish.com – Yonah's journey is a metaphor for life.

The Vilna Gaon tells us that Yonah's journey is one that we all make. We are born with a subconscious realization of the fact that we have a mission. We seek escape, because our mission is often one that we are afraid to attempt.

In the text of the Yonah story we are told that the places that he sought were Yaffo and Tarshish. While these places actually exist and are known as Jaffa and Tarsis, the literal meaning of the names of these cities is "beauty" and "wealth." We comfort ourselves externally, by escaping from our inner knowledge of our mission through

the pursuit of wealth, and by surrounding ourselves with beauty. Our bodies are compared to Yonah's ship. We face moments in life in which the fragility of our bodies is inescapable, as in when we face illness, or confront moments of danger that seem to last an eternity until they are resolved.

The sailors on the ship are the talents and capacities that work for us. They too cannot save us from our futile desire to escape ourselves. The whale is the symbol of ultimate confrontation of the recognition that our ultimate fate is the grave. For some, that recognition almost feels like a welcome refuge. For others, facing death forces them at last into pursuing life!

As with Yonah, our recognition of our own vulnerability can bring us to finally transcend our ego, surrendering our desire to control events, and beginning at last to accept our mission in life, no matter what it is. We can suffer the vicissitudes of life, and recognize that we ourselves have caused the storms to toss us back and forth. We can move forward to fulfill our purpose, but we are still not free of conflict and anxiety until we finally recognize that every step along the way, we are embraced by Divine compassion. It is then that we are ready to return to God. While for each of us the path is our own, and never yet explored by any other person, Yonah knew the beginning and the end of the journey that we all make.

Section VI. The Neilah Service (AS: pp. 706-765)

The culmination of Yom Kippur is the Neilah prayer, said at dusk just as Yom Kippur is coming to a close. In this climactic service, we ask God to seal our fate for good.

Rabbi Mordechai Becher, Gateway to Judaism, p. 139 – A description of the Neilah service.

Yom Kippur ends with the third special prayer, *Ne'ilah*, which means "closing of the gates." It is the culmination of a day devoted to repentance, intense concentration and prayer. *Ne'ilah* offers the last chance to seize the moment of Yom Kippur and to tap into the closeness with God that is so accessible on this holy day. *Ne'ilah* is said just before sundown, just before the metaphorical "closing of the Heavenly Gates." The Holy Ark containing the Torah remains open for the entire *Ne'ilah* service, which begins with the silent prayer of Yom Kippur. Instead of saying, "inscribe us in the book of life," as we have since Rosh Hashanah, we now say "seal us in the book of life." *Ne'ilah* is the time when the Heavenly judgment on each person is "signed and sealed," not merely inscribed. *Ne'ilah* continues with the repetition of the silent prayer, and the congregation joins in reciting the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy along with other prayers in which we literally beg for life and forgiveness.

The service ends with the entire congregation gathering its last reserves of concentration and emotion, and crying out *Shema Yisrael*, "Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord is One," followed by "Blessed is the Name of His glorious

kingdom for all eternity.” This is said three times, after which “The Lord – Only He is God!” is repeated seven times. The cantor then recites *Kaddish*, the *shofar* is sounded, and the entire congregation says aloud and in unison, “Next year in Jerusalem!”

In many communities, the congregation repeats this phrase many times while dancing with joy. The solemnity of Yom Kippur is transformed into happiness and optimism, an expression of our belief that God will indeed forgive us and bring the redemption for which we have been praying and hoping.

Mishnah Berurah 623:3 – Neilah is a time to give it all you’ve got.

In the Neilah prayer we ask that God “seal” us instead of “inscribe” [us in the Book of Life]. For during Neilah the Heavenly judgment that was written for each person on Rosh HaShanah is sealed, whether for good or for bad.

One should make a great effort to motivate himself during this prayer, for it is the culmination of both the Ten Days of Teshuvah and of Yom Kippur, since one’s fate is decided by the sealing of the judgment. And if not now, when?

Therefore, even if one is weak from fasting, nevertheless he should strengthen himself to pray with pure and clear thoughts, and to take upon himself the commitment to do teshuvah sincerely and truthfully. For one who comes to purify himself is assisted by Heaven [Yoma38b] and will be sealed in the Book of Good Life.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, The Koren Yom Kippur Machzor, pp. 1104-1111 – The name “Neilah” signifies closing,

Ne’ilah, short for *Ne’ilat She’arim*, “the closing of the gates,” is a service nowadays unique to Yom Kippur.

There was a dispute between Rav and Rabbi Yohanan as to the significance of the name. One held that it meant the closing of the gates of the Temple, the other that it meant the closing of the gates of heaven (Yerushalmi, Berachot 1). What gives this moment its drama and urgency is that it is the culmination of the one day that has the power to cleanse us of our sins. The sages said that in the absence of the Temple and the service of the High Priest, the day itself atones.

Ibid. God is calling us to greatness.

Jews do not accept suffering that can be alleviated, or wrong that can be put right, as the will of God. We accept only what we cannot change. What we can heal, we must. So, disproportionately, Jews are to be found as teachers fighting ignorance, doctors fighting disease, economists fighting poverty, and lawyers fighting injustice. Judaism has given rise, not in one generation but in more than a hundred, to an unrivaled succession of prophets, priests, philosophers, poets, masters of halachah

(Jewish law) and aggadah (moral teachings), commentators, codifiers, rationalists, mystics, sages and tzadikim, people who gave the Divine Presence its local habitation and name.

Judaism has consistently asked great things of our people, and in so doing, helped make them great. Tonight, at Ne'ilah, God is calling us to greatness.

That greatness is not conventional. We do not need to be rich or successful or famous or powerful to find favor in the eyes of God and our fellows. All we need is *chen*, graciousness; *chesed*, kindness; *rachamim*, compassion; *tzedek*, righteousness and integrity; and *mishpat*, justice. To be a Jew is to seek to heal some of the wounds of the world, to search out the lonely and distressed and bring them comfort, to love and forgive as God loves and forgives, to study God's Torah until it is engraved in our minds, to keep God's commands so that they etch our lives with the charisma of holiness, to bring God's presence into the shared spaces of our common life, and to continue the story of our ancestors, writing our chapter in the book of Jewish life.

Ibid. – The question God asks us at Ne'ilah is not, “Are you perfect?” but “Can you grow?”

“Wherever you find God's greatness,” said Rabbi Yohanan, “there you will find His humility” (Megillah 31a). And wherever you find true humility, there you will find greatness. That is what Yom Kippur is about: finding the courage to let go of the need for self-esteem that fuels our passion for self-justification, our blustering claim that we are in the right when in truth we know we are often in the wrong.

Most national literatures, ancient and modern, record a people's triumphs. Jewish literature records our failures, moral and spiritual. No people has been so piercingly honest in charting its shortcomings. In Tanach (Scriptures) there is no one without transgression. Believing as we do that even the greatest are merely human, we also know that even the merely human can also be great. And greatness begins in the humility of recognizing our failings and faults.

The greatness to which God is calling us, here, now, is “not in heaven nor across the sea” but in our hearts, minds and lives, in our homes and families, our work and its interactions, the tenor and texture of our relationships, the way we act and speak and listen and spend our time. The question God asks us at Ne'ilah is not, “Are you perfect?” but “Can you grow?”

There are three barriers to growth. One is self-righteousness, the belief that we are already great. A second is false humility, the belief that we can never be great. The third is learned helplessness, the belief that we can't change the world because we can't change ourselves. All three are false. We are not yet great but we are summoned to greatness, and we can change. We can live lives of moral beauty and spiritual depth. We can open our eyes to the presence of God around us, incline our inner ear to the voice of God within us. We can bring blessings into other people's lives.

And now, in absolute humility, we turn to God, pleading with Him to seal us in the book of life so we can fulfill the task that He has sent us, to be His ambassadors to humankind.

Revach.net – Maximizing the moment!

When Yonah HaNavi picks the short straw, and it is decided that he is the culprit causing the raging storm, he tells the ship-hands, “*Sa’uni vihitiluni el hayam,*” – lift me up and cast me into the sea. Rav Elyashiv asks, why did Yonah say “lift me up” when he could have just said cast me into the sea? The word *Sa’uni* is extra.

Rav Elyashiv answers that Yonah knew his life was about to end. He also knew that a person can change the world in a single moment of time spent correctly in this world. By saying the extra word, he was trying to prolong his stay in this world for an ever so slight moment.

At Ne’ilah, in the closing moments of Yom Kippur, our fate will be sealed. We will be cast into the rough waters of life for another year, as the wide open gates to *Shamayim* (heaven) will be locked. All God ever asks from us is to open up our hearts “*Kichudo shel machat,*” a small opening like the eye of a needle. God will do the rest and open up our hearts like the massive gates of a large hall. Our task can be accomplished in short order with a single thought of regret and repentance. On this small thought hangs our fate, the fate of our family, and the fate of the entire Jewish people.

Grab the moment, seize it and don’t let it go to waste. “*Sa’uni,*” during Ne’ilah; cherish that single moment, and let it lift your fortune and change your life.

Rabbi Shlomo Einhorn from YUTorah.org – At Neilah, it’s time to motivate ourselves to change by breaking the shackles that are holding us back.

I can still recall quite vividly the shade of the sky on what was a beautiful Los Angeles Erev Shabbat. I had just heard that a great mystic, the Kaliver Rebbe, was staying at the house next door. I went over with two of my friends an hour before Shabbat to get a *berachah* (blessing) from the rebbe. We waited patiently in the backyard, and, after several minutes, the Kaliver Rebbe emerged from the house. His white and gold *bekeshe* (regal cloak), special for Shabbat was in perfect contrast with the deep blue sky and thick white clouds that seemed to hover directly over his head. He looked into our eyes in complete silence for over five minutes, five minutes that I will never forget. That day the trees had been still and the wind deadly silent, but as he stared at us, a cool breeze picked up, becoming uncharacteristically vibrant. Suddenly, the rebbe spoke: “Don’t worry; you aren’t stuck, you can move. God told Moshe at the Burning Bush, ‘*Shal naalecha me’al raglecha* (Remove your shoes from your feet).’ What was God telling Moshe? The root of the word ‘*naalecha* (your shoes)’ is *naal*, a verb that can also mean to lock. Remove the shackles weighing

you down, and soar upwards. ‘*Ki hamakom asher atah omed alav admas kodesh hu* (For the place upon which you are standing is holy ground).’ If you realize that wherever you stand, the ground is holy, nothing can restrain you. Your environment does not – cannot – restrict you.” With this message, the Kaliver Rebbe wished us a “gut Shabbos” and went back into the house. Though he left, his message stayed with me: it was time to get moving.

The Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rav Menachem Mendel Schneerson, interpreted the words “*V’halachta bidrachav* (And you shall walk in His ways),” beautifully. The verse’s simple meaning instructs us to mimic the attributes of God – “Just as He is merciful, so must you be merciful. Just as He is fair, so must you be fair.” The Lubavitcher Rebbe is bothered by the fact that the Rambam counts *V’halachta bidrachav* as one of the 613 mitzvot, since usually general, all-encompassing ideals such as “*Kedoshim tihyu* (You shall be holy),” are not counted. What, then, is so special about *V’halachta Bidrachav*? Rav Schneerson answers as follows: The mitzvah of *V’halachta Bidrachav* commands us to be “*holchim*, movers.” When we perform a mitzvah, we must not remain stagnant, but we must ensure that the mitzvah leaves its imprint on us. The guarantee of our survival is to constantly be in a state of motion. “*V’halachta*” tells us to get moving. “*Bidrachav*” tells us in what direction, in the way of God. *Vehalachta Bedrachav* is the requirement to constantly grow. Doing mitzvot and fulfilling our obligations is insufficient; we must also challenge ourselves to develop spiritually and mature.

We may feel locked in place by the commitments we have made that were too difficult to keep. We may have bound ourselves to a past that is too heavy to bear. [Yom Kippur] bears the message of the Kaliver Rebbe: it is time to start moving. “*Shal naalecha – Remove your old shoes.*” Remove your shackles. It is no coincidence that the climax of the Yom Kippur service is Neilah, the root of which is *naal*, shoe. This is because, by the time Yom Kippur ends, we have thrown away our old shoes, our old shackles, and replaced them with new *naalayim*, shoes that will help us to soar skyward.

Rabbi Moshe Weinberger, Yom Kippur Neilah 5773 – God is waiting for us to return to Him.

I heard a story from a friend over the summer about Rav Yitzchak Hutner that can help us learn how to reignite the candle inside for these last few minutes of Yom Kippur. Rav Hutner spent the last few years of his life in Yerushalayim. During that time, his Rebbetzin passed away. Two of the great Musser masters of that time, Rav Shlomo Wolbe and Rav Meir Chodosh paid him a shiva call. Rav Hutner told them the following story during that visit:

He told them that as a yeshiva boy in Slabodka, he was a student of the famous “Alter” of Slabodka. He said that in those days, he (Rav Hutner) was known as having a very sharp mind for studying Torah, but also for his sharp tongue, which he unfortunately sometimes used to make other yeshiva boys feel bad. He said that

he was known as a “*lamdan*,” a talented Torah scholar, but not as *tzadik* (righteous person) because of his sense of *yeshut*, self-importance.

A few days before Yom Kippur one year, the Alter sent another boy over to him to ask him something. He replied sharply to the other boy, “I don’t need anyone to send a message to the Alter. I can speak to him myself.” The boy was taken aback. The young Yitzchak Hutner walked over to the East wall of the Beit Medrash to speak to the Alter, but as he approached, the Alter yelled to him, “Don’t come within my *daled amot* (near me)!” The Alter was known for his sweetness, so this was a particularly hard slap in the face. Young Yitzchak walked away and did not speak with the Alter about it. He said that he thought about it throughout Yom Kippur, but only from the perspective of his own ego. By the end of Yom Kippur he decided that if the *Mashgiach* (the yeshiva’s spiritual guide) spoke to him that way, he should find somewhere else to learn.

Immediately after Yom Kippur he went to the Alter’s home to say goodbye and ask for a blessing before he departed. He knocked on the door and the Rebbetzin answered. He asked for the Alter, and she asked who he was. He answered, “Hutner,” and she responded, “So *you’re* Hutner!” Expecting to get an earful, he waited to hear what she would say. She told him, “For the last six months, my husband has been crying, davening, and fasting for you.” He realized that the Alter saw great potential in him and was very worried about him and was davening very hard for him to improve. He said that because of that encounter, he continued learning in the yeshiva. How could he leave a rebbe who cared so much about him that he spent six months davening, crying, and fasting for him?

Perhaps many of you feel as I do that after a year in which we have not been as good as we hoped to be last year on Yom Kippur. We may feel, “How could God want me near Him after how I’ve wasted this past year, or worse?” Perhaps we also feel we have experienced a slap from the One Above this past year. We may feel that the great “Alter” in Heaven must be saying “Don’t come near me!” But then, we knock on the door of our loving mother, the שכינה, the Divine Presence, and She asks our name. We answer with our names, and then she says “Oh *you*? The Holy One has been crying and hoping for you to return to him for years! You mean so much to Him!”

Ibid. – There’s still time to change.

It is never too late. Even in this last hour of Yom Kippur, we can make the decision to be better and seek forgiveness. It is well-known that the Amshinover Rebbe of Yerushalayim lives in his own time zone apart from the rest of the world. But with respect to Shabbat and Yom Tov, he certainly observes those at the regular times. There is a story that one year, Erev Yom Kippur, he was eating with the Chassidim, and it was getting closer and closer to Kol Nidrei. The Chassidim began getting very nervous, but the rebbe was teaching Torah and eating as if he was in no rush

at all. The Chassidim asked one of the older men among them to say something to the rebbe. So the Chassid held up a watch and called out, "Rebbe, the watch!" The rebbe responded, "Ah, yes, the watch. I'm aware of the time. But I have two watches. One watch says, 'It's getting late!' and the other watch says, 'There's still time.'"

It is not too late for us either. We have no idea of the spiritual rectifications we can accomplish just by saying the words of Neilah and trying to move our bodies and raise our voices just a little bit in the songs. It is very difficult in our generation to awaken our emotions and to have kavanah, concentration, in prayer. But we can say the words and try to sing them with a little force. This accomplishes great things.

Ibid. – Focus on resolving to improve and upon forgiving others.

If we do two things during Neilah, we can certainly have a great year filled with forgiveness and atonement. First, we must make an absolute decision to improve at least one thing in our service of God this year. It does not have to be "big," but it must be a true commitment. This is the major ticket to success on Yom Kippur. With God's help, we can build on that one thing, and we will be very big one day.

The second thing is that we must take the loftier perspective with which we are blessed on Yom Kippur and realize that any grudge that we have been holding against our friends, spouses, children, family, or any other Jew is silly and ultimately meaningless. It does not matter whether the people who we feel have wronged us are here or not. We must make up in our minds right now to forgive all of the people who we feel have wronged us. In this merit, God will also forgive each of us for our sins against Him.

The Ben Ish Chai notes a beautiful, ancient custom from Baghdad, possibly going back to the times of the second Beit Hamikdash (Temple). Before Kol Nidrei, someone would call out, "*Rabotai, timchalu zeh lezeh!*" "Gentlemen, forgive one another!" And then the entire congregation would call out, "*Machalnu!*" "We forgive!"

In the merit of the improvements we take upon ourselves for the coming year and our forgiveness of one another right now, may God forgive us right now and bless us with everything good for the coming year and the ultimate good with the coming of Mashiach (the Messiah) and our return to Yerushalayim, may it come soon in our days.

Final Shofar Blowing (AS: pp. 764-765)

Rabbi Eliyahu Kitov, The Book of Our Heritage, Vol. I, p. 108 – There are many reasons for blowing the shofar at the end of Yom Kippur.

A number of reasons are given for the sounding of the shofar at the end of Yom Kippur: It commemorates the *yovel* (Jubilee) year which was celebrated when the

Beit ha-Mikdash stood and which was announced at the conclusion of Yom Kippur. With the sounding of the shofar announcing the *yovel*, slaves were freed and sold properties reverted to their original owners.

Just as victorious armies sound their trumpets to announce their successes, so too we sound the shofar to announce our victory over Satan (the *yetzer hara*/evil inclination).

It commemorates the binding of Yitzchak at the time when our judgments are sealed.

It recalls Moshe's ascent and descent from Heaven for the third time, which was accompanied by the sounding of the shofar. Moshe ascended on *Rosh Chodesh* (the first day of the month of) Elul and descended on Yom Kippur.

It is an allusion to the withdrawal of the *Shechinah* (Divine Presence) from our midst, for the verse (Tehillim/Psalms 47:6) states: *And God ascended with the sounding of a teruah* (shofar blast).

It announces that night has come and that the children who fasted should be fed.

It is a declaration that the night following Yom Kippur is like a holiday, and it is thus a *mitzvah* to eat a festive meal.