

Kindly take a moment to study MISHNAS CHAYIM in the merit of
Esther *bas* Sh'muel *a"h*
a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of her *neshamah*

Yom Kippur is a Great Day

There is a popular song, the words of which come from a well-known Mishnah (*Yoma* 8:6):

אמר רבי עקיבא, אשריכם ישראל, לפני מי אתם מטהרין, ומי מטהר אתכם, אביכם שבעשמיים.

“R’ Akiva said: How fortunate are you, Yisrael! Before Whom are you purified, and Who purifies you? Your Father in Heaven!”

Really Pure

These are definitely lofty words to repeat and sing about. What would happen, though, if we were to question the song’s enthusiasts about the basic meaning of the Mishnah; have we put thought to that? Obviously, it places an emphasis on the notion of “purity,” referring – in relation to Yom Kippur (the context of the Mishnah) – to the cleansing from sin. But doesn’t it seem a bit wordy? “Before Whom do you become purified, *and* Who purifies You?”

Moreover, the beginning part of that Mishnah in *Yoma* cites the *passuk* from parshas Acharei Mos, which encapsulates the essence of Yom Kippur: כִּי־בַיּוֹם הַזֶּה יִכַּפֵּר עֲלֵיכֶם לְטַהֵר אֶתְכֶם מִכָּל חַטֹּאתֵיכֶם לִפְנֵי ד' תִּטְהַרְוּ “For on this day, He will atone for you, to purify you; from all of your sins before Hashem, you will be purified” (*Vayikra* 16:30). Once again, we see a premium placed on the “purity” factor: “... to *purify* you... you will be *purified*.” As we know, the Torah is extremely deliberate in its choice of wording, where every word, syllable, letter, etc., is accounted for. How are we to understand this, exactly? What is “going on” with all of this purity? As we shall see, far from mere extraneous terminology, these words reflect the sheer magnitude of the day.

“For the Day of Hashem is great” (*Yo’el* 2:11). The Medrash Tanchuma (*parshas Vayishlach*) understands this as a reference to Yom Kippur. But why, in fact, is Yom Kippur such a “great day”? That may seem like an unusual question; Yom Kippur is the climax of the sublime and awesome period known as the *Yomim Nora'im* (Days of Awe), and – as its name suggests – it is the day on which we attain atonement for our sins. But how deep, exactly, is our understanding of this idea? Is it merely that by undergoing a Yom Kippur, one is spared punishment for his sins? Is this what R’ Akiva in the Mishnah is so ecstatic about, that we become “off the hook,” so to speak? Or is there something more profound at play here?

Tree of Life

The *Ba’alei Mussar* (masters of ethical teachings) exhort us extensively to properly appreciate the severity of what a “sin” is – aside from the attendant punishment aspect. R’ Leib Chasman makes this point by referencing a question that R’ Chaim Volozhiner asked his *rebbe*, the Vilna Gaon. When Adam HaRishon committed that first sin of partaking of the forbidden fruit of the

Tree of Knowledge, he was expelled from Gan Eden over the concern of what might occur if he stayed: “Lest he stretch out his hand, take even from the (fruit of the) Tree of Life, eat it and live forever” (*Bereishis 3:22*). R’ Chaim wondered: What would be so terrible if Adam were, indeed, to live forever? The Gaon answered that it was crucial, at this point, for man to experience death, for that is what would expiate his sin.

R’ Leib Chasman points out that the Gaon’s answer is truly extraordinary. Recall that we are dealing with the holy Adam HaRishon, dwelling within the paradisiacal, pristine confines of Gan Eden. He would be attended to by ministering angels, who would roast his very meat. Imagine, in this setting, how many *mitzvos* and good works he could have accomplished had he been granted the ability to remain there forever! But the whole situation was forfeited so that he could erase the stain of that one sin. Apparently, the prospect of serving Hashem eternally amidst the loftiest conditions was deemed “not worth it” if Adam would have to bear his sin (*Ohr Yahel, vol. I, Shevivei Ohr*).

What Happens on Yom Kippur

One who recognizes the actual severity of a sin – how, aside from the prospect of retribution, its very presence serves as a barrier between a Jew and Hashem, preventing him from attaining true closeness – can fully appreciate how “fortunate is Yisrael” to have a Yom Kippur. For this day, if utilized properly, presents a remarkable opportunity. Through it, those sins that separate us from Hakadosh Baruch Hu can be erased, clearing the way for our attachment to Him.

The Nesivos Shalom (*Yom Hakippurim, § 5*) goes one step farther in delineating what transpires on this day. In truth, there are two forms of *taharah* (purity). One who has sinned has defiled himself; when the sin is pardoned, he is now “pure.” That is, *taharah* is the removal of impurity. But then there is another, more elevated aspect of *taharah*, more than just the absence of defilement; this is actual, positive *taharah*, in which one is imbued with a measure of real purity.

Hashem Himself is referred to as “pure.” Obviously, the whole notion of sin and impurity cannot possibly be applied to Him. It would be superfluous and nonsensical to characterize Hashem as merely “absent of impurity.” Thus, the “purity” ascribed to Him is the positive form of *taharah*.

And this is the great gift of Yom Kippur. Through repentance, we shed our sins, thereby gaining atonement and (the first form of) *taharah*. To this the verse refers when it states: “That you become purified from all of your sins.” The exceptional uniqueness of this day is that Klal Yisrael receive even more. That next level of *taharah* can come only from Hashem, Who is the Source of true purity. Thus, He imbues us with a measure of positive purity, which emanates from Him: “*Before Hashem* you will be purified.”

This is the full import of R’ Akiva’s renowned statement: “How fortunate are you, Yisrael! Before Whom do you become purified” – that is, through your own efforts, taking the first step, you repent and become cleansed of the defilement of your misdeeds. What happens next? “And Who is it that purifies you” – Who imbues you with actual, positive purity, elevating you to levels that you could not attain on your own? “Your Father in Heaven... *He* purifies you.”