

Haazinu

Importance, Finiteness, Forgiveness, and Relationships

Why is it that *Yom Kippur* has such a hold on the Jewish mind? Even those who are far away from Judaism feel they have to celebrate or at least recognize *Yom Kippur* in some way. Even many Jews who do not go to *shul* on *Yom Kippur* will still fast, and even those who are far from Judaism will desist from their normal activities and somehow mark *Yom Kippur*. In Israel you cannot find a car on the road on *Yom Kippur*. All the restaurants are closed. Even the television and radio are silent. This is in a country which contains a recognizable minority of Jews who mock other Jewish religious observances.

Yom Kippur is a day which speaks to the Jewish soul because it is based on the Jewish perception of life. Without *Yom Kippur*, the Jewish perception of life makes no sense at all. *Yom Kippur* is the culminating day of the *Yomeen Naroyeem*, of the Days of Awe when each of us is judged, when our fate for the coming year is determined. It is very important that we all be judged because if we are not judged, then nothing we do is important. That means that whatever we do does not count. We all need to know that what we do is important, that what we do is needed. Unless we are counted on, we do not count. Judaism postulates the view that G-d needs us and wants us and is counting on us. Each of us is charged with making this world a little better place than we found it. It is our job to help G-d perfect this world. We are all G-d's junior partners in creation.

Rosh Hashona celebrates the creation of man as we know him. *Rosh Hashona* states that man has dignity. We have dignity because G-d trusts us. He has entrusted us each with a job. Each of us has a mission to fulfill. Each of us has tasks that only we can fulfill. Each generation's challenges are different but each generation's challenges must be met. We also each have the challenge of being the best child we can be to our parents and the best parents we can be to our own children, etc. As we learn in the *Torah* portion *Haazinu*, "Remember the days of old, understand the years of each generation." We are to meet the challenges of each generation using the principles of the *Torah*.

On *Rosh Hashonna* we do not say any *Selichos*, or penitential prayers. We do not throw ourselves upon G-d's mercy. We stand up straight and ask

G-d to judge us as we are. In Judaism we are not supposed to grovel. G-d makes us stand straight. This idea we emphasize every time we say the *Shmone Esre*. When we say the beginning word, *Baruch*, we bow our heads, but when we come to the word "*Hashem*," "G-d," we stand up straight because G-d gives us courage and dignity. G-d trusts us and counts on us. Each of us is important. There is no one that does not have a task to do in this world. None of us should ever sit passively by and say, "I can't make a contribution." Everybody can make a contribution to the betterment of this world. Some can do it by exercising great intellectual talent, some by physical service, others by giving love and encouragement and hope, others by the courage they show in the face of adversity, etc. *Rosh Hashona* pronounces to the whole world that every human being is important and especially every Jew who knows that he is serving the King of Kings, the Holy One, Blessed be He.

However, we all know that the High Holy Days, the *Yomeen Naroyeem*, do not end with *Rosh Hashona*. Even though on *Rosh Hashona* we blow the shofar to remind us to respond better in the future to the tasks which we all know we have before us and even though we blow the shofar to proclaim to the world that our G-d is a mighty G-d Who is just, we all know that we have failed to live up to our responsibilities. We know that we have come up short during the year. We have not met all the challenges that we could have. We have not done everything that we know we could have done to meet the charge which G-d has given us. Therefore, after *Rosh Hashona*, we once again begin to say *Selichos*, or the penitential prayers. We ask not only for G-d's justice but also for His mercy.

In Judaism we do not view justice as the enforcement of the strict letter of the law. We view justice as the combination of law and mercy, of *Din* and *Chesed*. We cannot have true justice without having a combination of both. Law in Hebrew is known as *Din*. *Rosh Hashona* is the Day of *Din*, the Day of Law. *Chesed* is the attribute which is lauded on *Yom Kippur*, especially during the *Selichos*, or penitential prayers, but the thing that we seek most is true justice or righteousness. It is interesting to note that when two litigants in a civil case come before a rabbi, the rabbi is supposed to ask him, "Do you want *Din*? Do you want this case settled according to the strict letter of the law, or do you want a *Peshora*, a compro-

mise?" In secular law the judge may recommend arbitration and may even issue the results of the arbitration as a court degree, but the judge, himself, is not involved in the arbitration proceedings. This is different in Judaism. In Judaism the judge is supposed to be actively involved in arriving at the compromise solution. In fact, the court proceedings of the arbitration are very similar to the court proceedings that would take place in a trial based on law. The question can be asked, how is it possible that a judge can be involved in arriving at a compromise? After all, a court is set up to search for the truth. As we learn, truth shall pierce the mountains. The rabbis in the *Talmud Sanhedrin* disagree and say no. They say that justice should include law and peace. In a normal court case where there is a winner and a loser, hatred will many times ensue. The loser may feel that he has been cheated, that the laws are crooked or the judges are not impartial. Jewish law is more interested in preventing a feud than in settling the issue. It is true that if one of the parties demands the law, the law will be given, but it is more important that a compromise be reached so that in the future harmony and peace and good relations will be assured within a community.

The reason for this is actually based on the whole concept of *Yom Kippur*. In fact, when Moshe, who is the epitome of the Jewish leader, judge, (the word "judge" in Hebrew has a wider meaning than judge in English; it also refers to "leadership" as evidenced by the fact that the *Book of Judges* really speaks about the leaders of the Jewish people) first judged the Jewish people the *Torah* says that it was on the morrow, which the rabbis interpret to be the day after *Yom Kippur*. Moshe was to judge the people with the concepts he learned from *Yom Kippur*. What are the two major concepts we learn from *Yom Kippur*?

The first concept is that we can be forgiven. "Yesterday we were ugly and distant from G-d because of our failures, our sins, but today we are beautiful and can once again be close to G-d because we have been forgiven for our failures, for our sins." We may have come up short as a junior partner in creation, but G-d has overlooked our shortcomings and has agreed to let us start over again with a clean slate. We can now once again look in a mirror and be proud of ourselves. Our guilt has been removed from us because we have made up with our fellow human beings and promised G-d to try to do better in the future.

The second important concept is the basis of our plea for forgiveness. Why is it that G-d can so readily forgive us for our failures, for our sins? The answer the rabbis tell us is because we are finite. We cannot possibly know everything. We appeal to G-d on *Yom Kippur* stating that, "It is true, G-d, that You can remember all our failings and since, but still You must extend Your hand to us sinners because You created us with finite knowledge. We do not know all the circumstances. We sometimes act inappropriately because we do not have perfect knowledge and, besides, G-d, You created within us the *Yetzer Hora*, the desire to do things that are not always appropriate. What can You expect from us? How can You hold us to a rigorous standard knowing how finite we are and how susceptible we are to temptation?"

This second concept Moshe Rabbeinu was to remember especially when he sat down to judge the people. That's why he was supposed to ask the litigants if they wanted a compromise or the strict letter of the law, and he was to advise them to make a *Peshora*, a compromise. Why? The answer is that in all arguments between finite human beings, there is right and wrong on both sides. There is truth on both sides. No party is 100% right and no party is 100% wrong. Only if one of the parties did a criminal act has he forfeited his right to a *Peshora*, a compromise. A person, even if he is 100% right, has no authority to commit a criminal act. Because each of us are finite, we cannot grasp the whole truth. We all know that the mountain looks different from different perspectives. All human relationships must be based on the idea that we can compromise.

That's why on *Yom Kippur* in ancient days engagements were announced. The rabbis say there were no happier days than *Yom Kippur* and the 15th day of *Av*, a day on which also engagements were announced. The reason for this is that no marriage can endure if one party thinks they are always 100% right and the other one always 100% wrong. Also, no marriage can ever endure if either of the spouses tries to interrogate and hold guilty the spouse for things which happened before the marriage. When a couple gets married, they get married with a clean slate. What happened before the marriage must never be brought up.

We also learn how when Moshe sat down to judge the people the day after *Yom Kippur*, he judged them from morning until evening. The word

morning, "*Boker*," in Hebrew also means "to distinguish, to analyze," and the word for "evening," "*Erev*," in Hebrew also means "confusion." Moshe's job was also to clarify issues, to put things in proper perspective. The litigants who came before him were to be made to realize that in most instances their relationship was more important than the monetary issues involved. A couple, too, when they get married, has to realize that more important than this argument or that argument is their total relationship, and they must guard it. On the day of a couple's marriage, they fast. It is a *Yom Kippur* for them because it is to teach them the values of *Yom Kippur*: one, that they are starting out with a clean slate and, two, that they have to realize that neither of them is always going to be 100% right, that they are finite and, three, that relationships are more important than things.

What draws Jews no matter the intensity of their religious beliefs to *Yom Kippur* is that *Yom Kippur* proclaims: (1) every individual is important and needed by G-d; (2) that we have an important role to fill in perfecting this world; (3) that we each have dignity and are deserving of respect because each of us has a role; (4) that inevitably, in spite of our achievements, we will not achieve all the goals set out for us, that we will have failures, sins; (5) that irrespective of our past performances, if we still want to try to continue to achieve the goals set out for us by G-d, He will give us the opportunity to do so; (6) that each of us can be beautiful again in our own sight, that we need not stay with a bad self-image; (7) that because each of us is finite, we will not be able to grasp the whole truth or be always right, but this should not stop us from forming relationships; (8) that we can have strong relationships, not only in spite of the fact that we make mistakes and are finite, but because of it; (9) that ultimately relationships are the most satisfying things in the world; (10) that there is meaning in the world and that G-d loves us all and wants us to grasp this meaning so that we can live good lives. May we all be blessed with the ability to find this meaning in the coming year and, thus, have the ability to lead good lives. Amen!