

Seeking Forgiveness after Yom Kippur

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So here we are, back at Temple, just twenty-four hours after Yom Kippur. Walking into the Sanctuary, seeing our Torah scrolls still dressed in white, you could be forgiven for thinking that we were either too burned out to change the covers or that you had entered a time warp and the High Holy Days aren't really over. That last part is particularly persuasive, given that the mantles bear the words תשובה, תפילה, and צדקה, emblematic of the central theme of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur: תשובה, changing our behavior for the better, תפילה, prayers asking God to forgive us, and צדקה, charitable giving that counteracts our wrongdoing, constitute the High Holy Day formula for achieving atonement.

All that is over; right?

Late yesterday afternoon, as the sun was setting, *Mishkan HaNefesh* repeatedly insisted that the process was at an end. Our final service was called נעילה, which means “locking” Though we repeatedly pled with God, פתח לנו שער, “Open the gates for us,” we did so because we knew: The Yom Kippur gates of repentance were not only about to close, but they would also be locked.

In the Torah, though, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are very much part of a fall holy day cycle that only ends with Atzeret-Simchat Torah at the end of Sukkot. In the biblical period, Sukkot, Passover, and Shavuot were the most sacred times of the Israelite year. Ancient Israelites lived and died by the agricultural cycle, and celebrating the fall and spring harvests was of the utmost importance. The most significant of those harvests was in springtime, when wheat and barley, grain to make bread, were ready to be harvested.

Paradoxically, that meant that the most important harvest festival was in the fall, namely Sukkot. Our sages called Sukkot הַחַג, **the** festival. Nothing is more important to agriculture than rainfall—in season, enough rain, but no flooding. While it's not true that “it never rains in California,” it really never rains in Israel in summertime. Ever. Sukkot marks the beginning of the rainy season, and our ancestors believed that God sent rain only if the people were deserving. Prayers for rain, offered during Sukkot and especially on Shemini Atzeret, the Eighth Day of Assembly at the end of Sukkot, were believed to be essential to a successful year.

Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur in those days were therefore primarily precursors to Sukkot. They provided an opportunity to get right with God in time to pray for the rain.

The mystics who wrote the Zohar imagined God seated on a Throne of Judgment, waiting for humanity to repent. Humankind struggles to awaken repentance, to remove themselves from the guilty side of God's ledger through תשובה, תפילה, and צדקה. In the mystical imagination, God writes a verdict, condemning humanity, but God tears it up if they do Yom Kippur right. If the guilty verdict remains after Yom Kippur, the verdict of condemnation is sealed. However, the mystics continue: "If humankind has not achieved שלום sufficiently [on Yom Kippur], then judgment is suspended until the last day of the holiday, Sukkot, that last day being Shemini Atzeret. And if humankind has achieved full repentance before their Master, then the guilty verdict is torn up."ⁱ

The Zohar is meant to be taken seriously, but not literally. In this case, what that means is that no, even the mystics likely didn't imagine that God literally issues a slip of paper with the verdict. Instead, what's important here is that the gates of repentance, supposedly locked last night with the sound of the shofar, remain open. The gates, too, are a metaphor, not referring so much to gates of the Jerusalem Temple as we are taught, but instead as a barrier to the pathway to reconciliation with our Creator.

The point is extended in another Chasidic custom about a day that we have all celebrated without knowing that it had a particular name. Some Chasidic folks refer to the last day of Chanukah as זאת חנוכה, literally, "That's Chanukah," or "That's it for Chanukah." Tamar Ron Marvin teaches: There is a Chassid[ic] custom to mark Zot Chanukah as a day of joy—and final judgment. They get that from a portion of a verse in Isaiah: 'Assuredly, by this alone shall Jacob's sin be purged away...'"ⁱⁱ What is the "this" that frees our people of sin? The Hebrew word for "this" in this context is זאת, leading Chasidic folks to understand that זאת חנוכה, the last day of Chanukah, is a day on which we can find atonement.ⁱⁱⁱ

The opportunity to repent doesn't end even then. A quick examination of the prayers that pious Jews offer twice each weekday—that is, every day that is neither Shabbat nor a holy day—could lead us logically to conclude that the gates of repentance **never** close. Two of the nineteen blessings of the weekday עמידה address penitence. We pray, השיבנו לתורתך, "Return us to Your Torah and draw us to Your service and in complete repentance restore us to Your Presence. Blessed are you, Adonai, who welcomes repentance. And we pray, סלח לנו כי חטאנו, "Forgive us for we have sinned, pardon us for we have transgressed, for You pardon and forgive. Blessed are you, Adonai, abounding in forgiveness."^{iv}

In his *The Song of Teshuvah*, Rabbi Moshe Weinberger wrote, "Teshuvah is not an antidote for a specific misdeed. It is a permanent fixture of creation."^v God, Weinberger insists, always wants repentance—anywhere, at any time, by anyone.

The rabbinic discussion of when God remains open to repentance may feel merely academic, even esoteric. Do we **really** imagine that God could be so limited that God is unable to forgive at any time? Do we **really** express faith in a God who limits to תשובה a season that strictly ends with the shofar at the end of Yom Kippur?

The impact on our individual lives, though, is anything but esoteric. The lesson is that we should never imagine that the time to change our ways for the better is entirely in the past. Yes, we may have established unhealthy and unworthy habits that are hard to break. Yes, we may have harmed relationships, potentially beyond repair. Still, the message that the gates of repentance have not closed is important. Until we breathe our last, we have an opportunity to change our lives for the better, to be right with ourselves, with one another, and with God.

No, our service tonight does not include על חטא שחטאנו לפניך, “For the sin we have committed against you...” The annual ritual for confessing sins and formally seeking forgiveness has ended. Still, we may always pray with faith, at every season of the year and at every season of our lives, our lives, ועל כולם, “For all these things, forgiving God, forgive us, pardon us, grant us atonement.”

Amen.

ⁱ Zohar, *Parashat Vayechi* 220b.

ⁱⁱ Isaiah 27:9.

ⁱⁱⁱ Tamar Ron Marvin, “Hoshana Rabba: The Final Judgment?” *Sefaria* Sheet, <https://www.sefaria.org/sheets/436466?lang=bi>.

^{iv} From the weekday Amidah. Translations from Rabbi Elyse D. Frishman, Editor, *Mishkan T'filah: A Reform Siddur*, New York, CCAR Press, 2007, p. 84.

^v Song of Teshuva, Rav Moshe Weinberger (Commentary on Rav Avraham Yitzchak Hakohen Kook's Oros HaTeshuva)