YOM KIPPUR GEMS

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THE EVENING SERVICE

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The Heavenly Potter (P.66)

This prayer is one of the expressive highlights of the High Holy Day liturgy. It contains outstanding metaphors — G-d as potter, stone mason, craftsman, glassblower, draper and smelter. These images gently remind those of us made of stone hearts and set minds that we should be pliable, prepared to set out on a new spiritual course. G-d, the One who formed us, can shape us again, provided we are prepared to turn to Him and humble ourselves, temper our pride, and place ourselves upon the Divine potter’s wheel.

What the poem teaches us is that although our physical existence is dependent on G-d, our moral choice depends solely upon us. We may choose to resist our Maker or be open to Him. “I have set before you,” says G-d, “life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life.” We are free moral agents, capable of choosing between right and wrong, between life and death.

George Bernard Shaw once said, “The only person who really knows me is my tailor. When I go to get a new suit, he takes my measurements anew each time. Maybe I changed since I was there last.” We can always take our own spiritual measurements and reshape parts of our character that need adjustment.

In his book, Human Nature and Its Remaking, William Hocking, professor of philosophy at Harvard, says that “Human nature is the most plastic part of the living world. In man, heredity counts less than in any other species and conscious building forces count most.”
Hocking continues:

“Man’s infancy is the longest, his instincts are least fixed, his brain is most unfinished at birth, his powers of habit-making and habit-changing are most obvious. What sets man apart from and above other living beings is his great capacity to shape and mold himself.”

Hocking sums up his position by saying:

“To anyone who asserts as dogma that ‘Human nature never changes,’ tell them it’s the opposite, ‘It is human nature to change itself.’”

Or as this prayer puts it, we are “like clay in G-d’s hand.” If we want to be reshaped, we can. This is not to deny the vital influence exercised upon us by our biological inheritance, our childhood experiences, our environment and social conditioning. These things are real and powerful but the human will is even more powerful. For man is not only shaped by his environment; he shapes it.

Our **body’s height** may be biologically determined before we are born but our **moral stature** depends on us.

Our DNA determines whether our **eyes are blue** or gray but whether we **look with jealousy or compassion** is up to us.

Our location determines the **language we speak** but whether our **words** harm or heal, is the result of our own free choice.

Scientists have **mapped the genome**, but it’s up to us to determine where the **map will lead**.

G-d, with love and joy, has given us Yom Kippur so that we might be recast, shaped again, and transformed into works of beauty. The verdict is in our own hands as much as in the hands of the Heavenly Potter.

So friends, let us sing together, let us open our heart to change.

[Have the chazzan begin singing]

"כִּי הִנֵּה כַּחֹמֶר בְּיַד הַיּוֹצֵר...כֵּן אֲנַחְנוּ בְיָדְךָ חֶסֶד נוֹצֵר יָמֵינוּ כְּצֵל עובֵר"

YOM KIPPUR TIMEPIECE (P.71)

Why are there so few Jewish alcoholics? Because, the answer goes, Jews don’t want anything to interfere with their suffering.

Well, Yom Kippur certainly is the day when we Jews don’t let anything interfere with our suffering. But it goes beyond this. Yom Kippur is not only a day of abstention from food, drink, intimacy, bathing, and cosmetics — it’s a day on which we think and dwell very specifically on the possibility of death.
Yom Kippur is ushered in by kindling candles and lighting yahrzeit lamps to remember those who are no longer among us. Tradition specifies that today we don’t wear leather shoes, similar to when one sits shiva during the seven days of mourning. On Yom Kippur, the first sentence of the Torah reading deals with the death of Aaron’s sons, Nadav and Avihu, who were struck down early in life. Yom Kippur’s liturgy is replete with metaphors that remind us of human weakness, frailty, and mortality.

As we say in this prayer,

"יָמֵינוּ כְּצֵל עובֵר — Our days are like a fleeting shadow."

Why is it that on the holiest day of the Jewish year we focus so much on death, and on the fleeting nature of life? We know we need to repent, but do we really need to be this depressing? Why does our focus on guilt move into being so outright morbid?

This is especially perplexing, given the fact that Judaism — despite our kvetching — is so life-oriented. Jews are the people who see G-d in life – this life, down here on earth. The Jewish toast is l’chayim! “To life!” Moses’ great command was Uvacharta va-chayyim, “Choose life.” From Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur we pray: “Remember us for life, Sovereign who delights in life, write us in the Book of Life for Your sake, G-d of life”.

And yet, on Yom Kippur we spend so much time thinking about the possibility of death and how fragile and brief life is. Why?

The reason is: on Yom Kippur we are reminded how short life is, so that throughout the rest of the year we will remember how important it is to live it well, and to cherish it fully. If we never experience a rainy day, it’s impossible to fully appreciate the beauty of sunshine. We cannot truly appreciate life until we fully understand its loss.

“It is the denial of death,” said the famous psychiatrist, Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, “that is partially responsible for people living empty, purposeless lives. When we live as though we will live forever, it becomes too easy to postpone the things we know we must do…. In contrast, when you fully understand that each day you awaken could be the last you have, you take that day to grow, to become more of who you really are, to reach out to other human beings.”

That is what Yom Kippur reminds us of. It is the day on which we give a reckoning of our life, remembering how short life is, and how every day is a gift from G-d. When we know and feel that in our bones, that is when we really live.

In the 1990s, a New York inventor received a patent for a watch called the “Life Expectancy Timepiece.” The watch contained a tiny computer into which you enter your age, medical history, lifestyle, eating habits and exercise regimen. The watch then uses data to compute your life expectancy and begins counting down to zero, displaying the approximate time remaining in the user’s life.

You glance at your watch and it says: “You have 31 years, 20 days 15 hours, 3 minutes, and 17 seconds until you’re gone.” Isn’t that more Jewish then saying “it’s a quarter to four?”

I would call that watch the “Yom Kippur Timepiece,” because if we actually wore one, I suspect, we would get the message that life moves by fast, and we have to rethink our priorities. It would remind us that life is short, too short to waste on television and stalking friends on Facebook.
Life is too short to waste on idle gossip, or envying others for what they have, too short for anger and indignation, too short to waste our time criticizing others. The Yom Kippur Timepiece would remind us to love more and fight less. It would focus our attention on accomplishing rather than feeling — we would not wait for the right mood to do good. We would just do it — and we would be more productive in every way.

The greatest choice we ever get to make is how we use the brief time we are given in life. On the holiest day of the Jewish year, we suffer a bit and think about the possibility of death — so that for the rest of the year we will cherish life and spend time wisely.

WHY MUST WE BEAT OUR HEART OVER AND OVER AGAIN? (P.71-76)

During the confessional prayer of Yom Kippur the custom is to beat our heart over and over again with our right fist, while confessing our sins. But why do we beat our heart like this? Is it self-punishment? Is it an attempt to keep ourselves awake through a long day, similar to the act of slapping one’s own face? Or is it, perhaps a bit of ritual theater?

Harvard Professor Ronald Heifetz – one of the world’s leading experts on leadership – makes a fundamental distinction between what he calls a “technical challenge” and an “adaptive challenge”.¹ A technical challenge is one that can be solved by a technician. You have Hay fever, you go to a pharmacist, and he or she prescribes 10 milligrams of anti-histamines. You feel human again. Your car starts making a strange sound. You take it to the mechanic. He replaces the broken part. You suspect you overpaid, but the strange sound is gone. Problem solved. These are technical problems and easy to tackle.

An adaptive challenge, however, is where WE are a part of the problem, and it is WE who have to change for the problem to be addressed. You have an adaptive challenge when the doctor tells you to quit smoking, exercise, and introduce healthy leafy vegetables into your otherwise unsavory diet.

Most of us don’t like having to change our mindset, habits, or behavior, so we’re constantly tempted to see the problem as a technical one caused by something or someone outside of ourselves. It’s not me, its society. It’s not me, it’s my parents, or my spouse, or my work colleagues. They caused the problem. Let them do the fixing, not me.

On Yom Kippur, we tap our heart over and over again as we enumerate our misdeeds to drive home the point that our problems mostly come from within us. They are, on the whole, adaptive challenges — they are our bad habits, sins, and weakness and only we can do the fixing.

A man came to a Chasidic Master and asked the Rabbi to pray for him that he should be virtuous and not sin. The Master closed his eyes in deep meditation, and then said, “I was successful. My prayers have been accepted. G-d is completely in agreement that you should be virtuous and not sin. The rest is up to you.”
It is up to us. No one else can do the fixing for us, not even G-d. On this day, G-d wants us to take responsibility for our deeds. We must do the work ourselves. Others can help us change and grow as people, but ultimately it is each of us who is responsible for who we are and who we become.

עַל חֵטְא

IT IS NOT ENOUGH TO REPENT  (P.73-76)

I ran across a cartoon showing a parishioner talking to his priest in a confession box. The caption read: “Well, that’s enough about me, Father. What have you been up to lately?”

Ten times during the Yom Kippur service, the Viddui or confession of sins is recited. But why is it necessary to confess verbally? Is it just lip service or is it meant to be a deeper experience? Maimonides, the great codifier of Jewish law rules that repentance is incomplete if Viddui has not been recited.ii So why is verbal confession so significant?

There was a husband and wife who fought for years over one of his habits that she found terribly annoying. He would never remember to put the top back on the toothpaste. This went on for fifty years. Finally, he decided one day that he was going to change. After all, this was a small habit to unlearn and she was a wonderful wife, so he decided he ought to do it. Besides, the High Holy Days were drawing near and this was the time when people were supposed to repent and change their bad habits.

So he began putting the top back on the toothpaste. He did it for a day, two days, three, a week and she never said a word. Finally, she said to him: “Dear, I don’t understand why after fifty years of marriage you have stopped brushing your teeth.”

It is not enough to repent. You also need to say what it is that you are repenting for. We need to tell the one whom we have hurt that we are sorry and that we are changing. That is the only way to restore the relationship.

And why do we need to confess our sins to G-d?iii He already knows exactly what is in our heart. The reason is the enormous power that speech has in transforming a person. There is an infinite human capacity for self-justification. We have a natural desire to look good before others, and before ourselves. Confession, articulating the wrongful behavior, forces us to admit the facts as they really are, to express the painful truth, that we were wrong.iv

Also, articulating the wrongful behavior provides relief from the guilt that traps people into continuing the pattern. This is similar to psychoanalysis, where the patient begins healing when they are able to articulate their trauma.

Confession and verbalization are ultimately the most successful way of acknowledging our mistakes, a key step we must take to arrive at the goal of teshuva and positive behavioral changes.v
WHERE G-D CAN’T ENTER (P. 173)

One of the core Jewish teachings is that G-d cares about righteousness and goodness in the most profound way. As we say in this prayer:

וְהָאֵל הַקָּדושׁ נִקְדַּשׁ בִּצְדָקָה

― The holy G-d is sanctified through righteous conduct. "vi

Therefore, wherever righteousness is perverted, there G-d is not sanctified. Wherever kindness is missing, G-d is not perceived.

I love the story about the poor man who tried to get into an exclusive, suburban synagogue. They were too polite to tell him that they didn’t want to let him in. So they put him off with one excuse after another. “You need letters of reference” they told him. And then: “You need to wait until the committee meets,” and so on. Until finally, the poor man gets the idea.

One day he went to the synagogue only to be rebuffed once again, and as he was walking away, feeling downhearted and depressed, he chanced to meet G-d, and G-d asked, “Why do you look so sad?”

The man said, “Because I’ve been trying to get into that Shul for months and I can’t get in.”

And G-d says, “You are in good company. I’ve been trying to get into that Shul for decades, and I can’t get in either.”

It makes no difference how grand the synagogue, or how many times G-d’s name is invoked in a place. Either justice, kindness and love are there, or else G-d is not there. That is the message of the words: הַָאֵל הַקָּדושׁ נִקְדַּשׁ בִּצְדָקָה.

Nowhere is the idea that G-d is sanctified with loving deeds more dramatically expressed then in an exceptionally strange detail in the construction of the desert Sanctuary.

The Ark, the holiest item of the Sanctuary furnishings, contained the most sacred object on earth, the Tablets on which G-d engraved the Ten Commandments (On everything else in the world it says “made in China.” On the tablets it said made in Heaven). Above the Ark, G-d instructed Moses to build Cherubim — two golden figures that lovingly faced each other. "vii

This raises a striking question.

The Jews had been told never to make any likeness that might be worshiped as a god, or an idol. Indeed, the desert Sanctuary itself was constructed as a tikkun (a fixing) of such an episode, the making of the Golden Calf. Was there not a great risk in introducing golden figures into the Holy of Holies?!

[Pause]

The answer is that the symbolism of the Cherubim was so powerful and so significant, that it was deemed by G-d Himself to be sufficient to outweigh the risk of misunderstanding.
What is the meaning of the Cherubim?

The Talmud says that the figures were מוערים זה בז זה — entwined in a loving embrace. viii

And the Torah states, it was in the space between the two Cherubs that G-d spoke to Moses.

The message is the following:

G-d is present when two people face each other in love. G-d lives where two people face each other, and express sensitivity, generosity and care. That is where G-d is truly home, like in His Holy of Holies. G-d is sanctified, where soul touches soul in righteousness.

We ask G-d’s forgiveness in our prayers, and at the same time we are asked by Jewish tradition to forgive our neighbors, friends and family, especially when they ask to be forgiven. Sometimes, however, that forgiveness is not complete. We say we forgive but, inside, we nurture a grudge, and actually do not let go completely of our psychological wound.

The Talmud, however, offers us a teaching which can be helpful in reminding us the importance of obliterating our old resentments. The Talmudix records that Rabbi Nechunia lived to a very old age. One day his students asked him: Rabbi Nechunia:

במה הארכת ימים - How did you attain longevity? What is your secret?

He replied: לא עלתה על מטתי קללת חבר — I never went to sleep with a grudge in my heart.

What we can glean from that story is that if we want to be healthy and feel good about our life, we should cleanse our hearts of all those stale grudges. People hurt you. Get over it. Stop letting those injustices bother you. Somebody treated you badly? The way to get even with them is to stop giving them the power to make you feel bad. They don’t deserve that power.

In some ways, Rabbi Nechunia can be connected to Donald Trump in that every night he would take a moment in his imagination to yell “You’re fired!” to any injustices he felt had been dealt to him. He would imagine telling those slights to collect their belongings and move out of his heart, forever. Let this Yom Kippur be your Donald Trump moment. Say to all your resentments, “You’re fired,” and move on.

When you move from an old home to a new home, the biggest problem you face is what to bring with you and what to leave behind. Logically, you should bring all the fond memories with you and leave behind the bitter ones, the grudges and the regrets. This prayer relates a similar message. As we head into a New Year, we should carry all of our friendships forward and leave behind all the old grudges.

A midrash tells us, G-d granted Adam and Eve an indispensable blessing as they were leaving the Garden of Eden: “I grant you the gift of forgetfulness,” G-d said, Why is that a good thing? It’s good because if you were to remember every little hurt ever done to you, you would never again
be able to smile. If you recalled every painful experience in your life, the burden of memory would sink your very soul.

The Hebrew word for happiness is “simcha.” The word “simcha” can also be read as “she-macha” meaning “the one who wipes away” as in the verse:

— אָנֹכִי הוּא מֹחֶה פְשָׁעֶיך — I will wiped away your sins.” The key to happiness, therefore, is to know how to wipe away grudges and forgive — completely.

A cocktail party has been defined as a gathering where sandwiches and friends are cut into little pieces. Or as the prophet Zechariah lamented long ago, “I was wounded in the house of my friends.”

A simple line that could heal many wounds and profoundly enhance the quality of all our relationships can be found in the following:

“עַל חֵטְא שֶׁחָטָאנוּ לְפָנֶיךָ בְּדִבּוּר פֶּה”
“For the sin which we have committed against You by the way we talk.”

Often, when we discover we have hurt someone’s feelings, our first reaction is, “I didn’t mean to.”

And that may be true. Few of us consciously set out to hurt another person, and thus we feel that this exonerates us. What matters, however, is that the other person IS hurt, not that it wasn’t our intention to hurt them. By judging our motives rather than the effect of our words, we attempt to assuage the guilt, and wriggle out of an apology.

Thus, the line “the sins we have committed by the way we talk,” reminds us not to assess our motives, but the effect of our words.

What we said, not what we intend is what counts.

THE AVODAH

Introduction: The Avodah

YOU ARE THE HIGH PRIEST

After the novelist Isaac Bashevis Singer won the Nobel Prize, he was asked why he writes in Yiddish, which is after all, a dying language. Singer smiled and answered: “You are quite right,
Yiddish is a dying language. But in Jewish history, the distance between dying and dead is very great.”

A similar question faced the Jewish people on the first Yom Kippur after the destruction of the Holy Temple in Jerusalem. It is difficult, perhaps impossible, for us to understand the crisis represented by the destruction of the Temple by the Romans in the year 70 CE. It was, to be sure, a military and political disaster. This, we have no difficulty in imagining. But it was also a spiritual catastrophe.

Let’s journey back through time, to a Yom Kippur long ago in the Temple to gain some perspective.

Holy Space

G-d’s whole world is great and holy. Holier still is the Holy Land. Within the Land of Israel itself the holiest city is Jerusalem. In Jerusalem the holiest place was the Temple, and within the Temple the holiest location was called the Holy of Holies, a small space that housed the Tablets.

Holy Time

There are 365 days in the year. Higher then these days are Holy festivals. Higher than festivals is the holiness of the Shabbat. Among the Shabbats, the holiest is the Yom Kippur, which the Torah calls the Shabbat of Shabbats.

Holy People

Every human being, having been created in G-d’s image, embodies holiness. The Jewish people are holy. The holiest of the Jewish people is the tribe of Levi. The holiest among the tribe of Levi are the Kohanim, the priests. Among the priests the holiest was the High Priest, the Kohen Gadol.

Holy Language

There are many languages in the world. Hebrew is a holy language. The words of the Torah are holier still, and the holiest of all words in the Torah is the ineffable Name of G-d.

And once during the year, at a certain awesome hour, these four supreme sanctities were joined together.xi That was on Yom Kippur, when the High Priest would enter the Holy of Holies and there utter the Name of G-d, seeking atonement for his people.

Then the Temple was destroyed. Jerusalem lay in ruins. Devastated, too, was the spiritual life of Israel. There were no sacrifices and no High Priest. None of the sacred rituals of Yom Kippur, as carried out in the Temple for close to a thousand years, could be performed. The awesome experience of the four facets of holiness merging vanished. The closeness to G-d that was attained on Yom Kippur and characterized by the Avodah was gone. How then could sins be eliminated and the people of Israel experience a restored relationship with G-d? How does a nation defined by its faith centered on the Holy Temple and actual sacrifices live on after the loss of its most fundamental institution and rituals?

The answer is contained in Rabbi Akiva’s famous statement said in response to the hopelessness felt by the Jewish people upon the Temple’s destruction. He said: xii

“אמר רבי עקיבה, אשריכם ישראל! نوفמי ואתם מותהרי? מי מתמר אתכם? ואיכם נשואים?”

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“Happy are you, Israel! Before whom are you purified and who purifies you? Your Father in Heaven!”

All the commentaries ask, “What is the significance of such a statement? Who else could purify us?” The answer lies in understanding the historical context of the statement. It was the first Yom Kippur after the Temple’s destruction. The Jews could not conceive of the possibility of such a Yom Kippur; a Yom Kippur without the Kohen Gadol, the sacrifices, the Holy of Holies. The Jews were in pain and despair. How could there be a Yom Kippur without a Beit Hamikdash?

Rabbi Akiva rose and with unwavering optimism said, “There is no need for such helplessness. Indeed, we are bereft of the Temple and the Divine expression of holiness. But till G-d wills it restored, we do not need a Temple or a High Priest to secure atonement.

We have lost our holiest place and our advocate. But we still have the day itself: the realm of holy time. On this day every place becomes a holy place and every person a holy individual standing directly before G-d. Because G-d hears every cry that comes from the heart, by turning to Him in repentance it is as if we had brought an offering in the Temple. When there is no High Priest to mediate between Israel and G-d, we speak to G-d directly and He accepts our prayer. G-d Himself purifies us. “Happy are you, Israel”!

So it has been for almost two thousand years. Like Bashevis Singer said, in Jewish history, the distance between dying and dead is very great!

So we fast and dress in white, and spend the day in prayer and confession. It is as if each of us stands in the Holy of Holies in Jerusalem, because G-d doesn’t care where we are, but how we live. And though we no longer have our Temple and its offerings, we do have something no less powerful: prayer, the “service of the heart”.

We are about to recite the Avodah, the prayer of our ancestors. Recall that tradition teaches us that our service of the heart is considered equivalent to our ancestors’ service in the Temple. With our heartfelt repentance, we allow the awesome holiness of Yom Kippur, which brought atonement to the previous generations of Jews in the Temple in Jerusalem, to fill our shul and own hearts as well. We each enter the Holy of Holies, as our own High Priest, two thousand years after its destruction. That, my friends, is a remarkable transformation that allowed Judaism to survive and flourish. The Temple is destroyed but we are “Am Yisrael Chai” — the living nation of Israel – today we celebrate that fact.

WHAT WILL YOU SACRIFICE? (P. 244)

The middle blessing of the Musaf Amidah on Shabbat and festivals always contains the Torah passage relating to the special additional sacrifice of the day.

In baseball, a sacrifice refers to a batter giving himself up to help the team. It is a commendable act but not a particularly demanding one — it does not even count against the player’s batting average. But in the Torah, and in real life, away from the baseball field, sacrifice means a lot more than giving up something small.
In every relationship, the measure of love is the willingness to give something of ourselves away. I will sacrifice my sleep, time, energy, wealth, and virtually anything for someone whom I love.

In the Torah, sacrifice means giving up something important, as a way to draw closer to G-d. The biblical word for sacrifice, Korban, comes from a root k-r-v which means “to draw near to G-d” by bringing the offering. In ancient times, when flocks and crops were the measure of a person’s wealth, Jews brought offerings of produce and animals as their gift of love. (Most of these offerings were shared with the poor and with others.) The Torah forbids bringing lame animals and unripe, inedible fruit as offerings, because they do not represent a giving up of anything truly meaningful. They are not a sincere effort at sacrifice.

In the Book of Leviticus, at the beginning of the laws of sacrifice we read: “When one of you brings an offering to G-d.” The word order of this sentence in Hebrew is odd though, and when read literally, the text says something very different, “Adam ki yakriv mikem,” “When you bring an offering of yourself to G-d.” The real sacrifice, the Torah tells us, is that we must offer ourselves. We bring to G-d our talents, our energies, our thoughts and emotions.

Our sages tell us that at the Holy Temple, when a sacrifice was offered, the priests presided, psalms were sung, and there was a heightened sense of consciousness in the one who brought the offering. The physical form of sacrifice — whether it be an animal or crops — was only the external manifestation of their inner act. The real sacrifice was mikem, “of themselves.”

On this day, we consider what of ourselves we will offer, what we give, as we seek to make space for G-d in our lives in the year to come.

The function of the Azazel (pp. 250-255)

At the heart of the service of the High Priest on Yom Kippur was a ritual that has added a key word to the vocabulary of the West: the scapegoat.

On the holiest day of the year, the High Priest — after confessing his own sins and those of his household — undertook a ritual to achieve atonement for the most serious sins of the community. He took two goats and cast lots over them. One was sacrificed to G-d as a sin offering. Over the other, he made confession for the sins of the people. It was then sent into the wilderness, to the wasteland “Azazel”

As the Torah states:

ונשא השעיר עליה את כל עונתך, אל ארץ גזרה; וישלח את השעיר לשברב

“The goat will carry all the sins away to a wasteland when it is sent to the desert”. xvii

What does this strange ritual mean? What does the Azazel symbolize?

There are many beautiful explanations. Maimonides’ understands it on a metaphysical level but in his, Guide for the Perplexed, he also offers a physiological explanation. Here it is.
“The scapegoat ceremony,” he says, “is a vivid, dramatic, image meant to impress the mind of the sinner that his sins must lead him to a wasteland.” When those who have broken G-d’s righteous laws see their sins placed upon the goat and sent out into the wilderness, it is hoped that they will “break with their sins ... distance themselves from them, and turn back to G-d in sincere repentance.” xviii

In other words: Sin destroys the sinner. Hate destroys the hater. Hedonism obliterates the hedonist, turning his life into a wasteland.

For Maimonides, the ceremony of deciding which goat will be “for G-d” and which “for Azazel”, is a symbol of the choice each one of us makes on Yom Kippur.

We can decide for G-d, for making our life better and more righteous or we can decide for Azazel and indulge in a selfish life of desires, and give ourselves over to the uncontrolled temptations. But in the end that that choice will only lead you to a wasteland.

Today we ask ourselves, what kind of person do I choose to be?

Recently I came across a story about an Indian tribal leader describing his personal inner struggles. He said, “There are two dogs inside me. One of the dogs is mean and evil. The other dog is good. The mean dog fights the good dog all the time.”

Someone asked him which dog usually wins, and after a moment’s reflection, he answered, “The one I feed the most.”

We get to choose between two goats: Do we pick the Azazel, the mean and bad inside us; do we surrender and feed our lowest drives and instincts? Or do we choose the other goat, the one that’s offered up to G-d, which represents the good things we do to elevate ourselves?

In the daily, if not hourly, wrestling match that sets the tone of our lives, sometimes the soul wins and sometimes the soul loses.

On this day we are reminded, not to be overwhelmed by despair if in the past the egotistical, Azazel impulse defeated the better angels in us. This day reminds us that the victory of Azazel can be temporary, not permanent, we can choose at any moment to cast away our bad habits, be forgiven, and start anew.

THE NEILAH SERVICE

INTRODUCTION

Friends, the sun is setting; the starry night is closing in around us. Our prayers of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur have ascended on high.

ניֵּעֶלֶת תַחֲנוּנֵנו מֵעֶרֶב

The Jewish people across the world have become reconciled with G-d. Now we have one powerful hour remaining before the gates of Heaven close.
Welcome to Neilah.

The ark remains open for the entire Neilah service. This symbolizes that the gates of heaven are open. All we need to do is walk through. Indeed, a key feature of the Neilah prayer is:

אַתָּה נוֹתֵן יָד לַפּושְׁעִים

“G-d’s hand is outstretched to the transgressor.” He is ready to forgive. In this final hour G-d calls out to us and says, “My child, let us reconcile, my hand is outstretched for you, please take it. No matter where you are today, I will help you; if you make a true effort you will succeed. My hand is extended”

Several years ago, right before the High Holidays, Elie Wiesel wrote an editorial for the New York Times about his encounter with G-d some fifty years after the end of the Holocaust. Wiesel wrote:

“More than 50 years have passed since the nightmare was lifted. Many things have since happened to those who survived. They learned to build on ruins. Family life was recreated. Children were born, friendships struck. They learned to have faith in their surroundings, even in their fellow man.”

Wiesel then asked the big question, “What about my faith in you, Master of the Universe?”

[Pause]

He answered. “I now realize I never lost it, not even over there, during the darkest hours of my life.”

[Pause]

Yes, Wiesel says, “In my books I have written harsh words about you G-d, burning words about your role in our tragedy. I would not repeat them today. But I felt them then....Why did you allow the killer to annihilate? Why were we abandoned? What was going on in Heaven, at the celestial tribunal, while your children were marked for death only because they were Jewish? These questions have been haunting me for more than five decades. G-d, You have vocal defenders. Many theological answers were given. I reject all these answers. Auschwitz remains a question mark.”

But even with these questions unanswered, Wiesel still could not abandon G-d. He closed his heart-wrenching Times piece as follows:

“As we Jews now enter the High Holidays again, preparing ourselves to pray for a year of peace and happiness for our people and all people, let us make up, Master of the Universe. In spite of everything that happened? Yes, in spite of that. Let us make up, for it is unbearable to the child in me to be divorced from you for so long.”

Friends, let us make up with G-d. The child in us, our Neshamah, calls out pleading, let us reconcile with G-d. Let this last hour be the time when we once again take G-d’s extended hand.

And as we do, with the gates of Heaven opened to us, let us pray, and ask Him for a sweet new year, a year of health and happiness, of nachas, wealth, of peace. Let us ask Him for a year in which we, our children, and our entire families all walk together hand in hand with G-d. This is
the power of this moment. Now is the time! Now, as we say Neilah, it is time to take on at least one mitzvah, and make it become a lasting part of who we are, and who you will forever be!

Neilah. Just one word, one hour, one heartfelt prayer, one extended hand, one mitzvah that is all it takes.

So let us begin:

אַשְׁרֵי יושְׁבֵי בֵיתֶך

(ENDNOTES)

1 See, Leadership Without Easy Answers, by Ronald Heifetz.
2 Hilchot Teshuvah 1:1, 2:2.
3 “When one repents and returns from his sin, he must confess before G-d... as it is written: (Bamidbar 5:6) ...and they shall confess the sin that they committed.” This refers to an oral confession. This confession is a positive commandment”. 4 Avodah Zarah 17a.
4 A passage in the Gemara in Kesubot (104a) relates this idea. After the passing of R’Yehudah HaNasi (Rebbe), the outstanding leader in the Tannaitic period, an informal proclamation was publicized: “Whoever states that Rebbe died should be stabbed with a sword.” The stark reality of his death was so painful that people could not even bring themselves to hear the truth expressed verbally. Man buries the truth as long as that truth is not verbalized.
5 This is simply by virtue of the fact that it is human nature to become uncomfortable and embarrassed when one verbalizes one's wrongdoing, even if one does not plan to change one's ways. And this uncomfortable feeling brought on by the confession is itself part of teshuvah. - See Likutei Sichot vol. 27, pp. 211-3.
6 Isaiah 5:16.7
7 Ex. 25: 20.
8 See Talmud Yoma 54a
9 Talmud Megillah 28a.
10 Zechariah 13:6
11 See Likkutei Sichot, vol. 2, p. 646 and Sichat 6 Tishrei 5745
12 אַשְׁרֵי יושְׁבֵי בֵית מְאַהֲבָי
13 Mishnah Yoma 8:9.
14 See Sichat 6 Tishrei 5731 and the beautiful Sicha about "突破口ו בפשעיך" in Hadronim Al Hashas Vol. 1, p. 90-97
15 See Rambam, Hilchot Teshuvah 1:3. “Now that the Temple no longer exists and there is not altar on which to atone, there is only repentance, and repentance atones for everything. Even if one was evil all his day and repented at the very end none of the evil is remembered... and the day of Yom Kippur itself (atzumo shel yom) atones for repenters, as the verse states: for through this day He will atone for you.
16 See Sichat Erev Yom Hakippurim 5743.
17 Lev. 16: 22.