

## A Tone Meant for the Day

Yom Kippur – Rav Benjy Myers

The High Holidays of Rosh haShana and Yom Kippur are truly Days of Awe. We stand in judgment before the Creator and plead for our lives, as we recall so vividly in the poignant prayer of *unetaneh tokef*. And yet, there is also much joy and happiness in the air. Rosh haShana is the day when we once more crown God as the ultimate Monarch and accept Him as the True Judge. We welcome His appointment with the sounding of the shofar, as well as the recitation of many *piyutim* - liturgical poems - on the theme of God as King and Creator.

Once we accept the position of God as King and Judge, we face the monumental task of stating our case and mounting our defense on Yom Kippur. It would seem to be almost insurmountable. How are we, seemingly insignificant specs in the vast magnitude that is the universe, to stand before God and plead our cases? Who are we to even contemplate such a course of action?

The answer, as with so many such questions, lies in our history. Our forefather, Avraham, when begging God on behalf of the wicked city of Sdom states, "for I am but dust and ashes" (Bereishit 17:27), and yet he still has the chutzpa to begin his dialogue with God with the question "will the judge of all the earth not do justice?" (*ibid.* 25).

Moshe does the same thing after the Jewish people sin with the Golden Calf, "Therefore should the Egyptians speak, and say, for an evil intent did he brought them out, to slay them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth? Turn from your fierce anger, and repent of this evil against your people...And the Lord repented of the evil which He thought to do to His people." (Shmot 32:12-14).

The same is true of us on Yom Kippur.



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We declare our shortcoming during the Amida in the confessional prayers of *Ashamnu* and *Al Cheit* and ask God to forgive us our sins, and yet at the end of the Amida we state, "My God, before I was formed I was unworthy, and now that I have been formed, it is as if I had not been formed. I am dust in my life and will surely be so in death." Who are we to say we are unworthy, and in the same breath ask to be considered worthy of forgiveness?

What therefore is it that unites these two great leaders into thinking that they can approach, and reproach, God in such a way, and what can we learn from them about our seemingly absurd behavior?

The answer lies in the goal of the request, for whom were they asking? In both situations, the request was not a personal one, they both asked on behalf of others.

The same is true of us on Yom Kippur.

At no point do we turn to God and plead our cases as individuals. Rather, we are all part of the collective. Our prayers are all in the plural. We plead guilty to any number of sins that we personally may never have committed, yet we are part of a whole and behave accordingly.

But there is more to Yom Kippur than the words. There is the unity. Anyone who has been to a major sporting event knows that one of the highlights is actually off the field of play. It is in the stands and bleachers where thousands of fans sing together, encouraging their team to reach greater heights and achieve victory. Sportsmen and women often speak of the influence that the supporters have on their performance.

The same is true of us on Yom Kippur.

The awe-inspiring melody of Kol Nidrei, the stirring chanting of God's thirteen Attributes, the lively, resounding cries of 'Amen' to the final Kaddish, and the joyous singing of *leshana habaa biYerushalym* (next year in Jerusalem) are but some of the examples where the entire



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congregation unites in song throughout the day. It is not enough to simply say the words, even if we are saying them on behalf of others.

This Yom Kippur, let us unite in prayer and song, and may the prayer of King Shlomo at the time of the dedication of the first Temple also be true of us, our families and all the Jewish people. "Have regard for the prayer of Your servant, and for his supplication, O Lord my God, to listen to the song and to the prayer which Your servant prays before You today...And listen to the supplication of Your servant, and of Your people Israel...and when You hear, forgive." (I Kings 8:28).



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