



WEEKLY PARASHA

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A Plastic Hour

Yom Kippur is almost upon us. It is a day that is classically spent in personal introspection and reflection, acknowledging and feeling remorse for our sins and misdeeds, and committing to try to do differently in the future. In previous years, I have shared my thoughts that I believe that this heavy emphasis on looking back can often be unproductive and unhelpful. It can weigh us down with guilt and self-blame and keep us mired in the past. The true goal of Yom Kippur, by contrast, is to repent, to leave the past and its limiting and constricting force behind, and to embrace the infinite possibilities of the future. We get no extra points for self-flagellation. What we get points for is accepting the gift that God has given us, the gift of forgiveness that allows us to start anew and to release the fullness of our human potential: "For on this day it shall be atoned for you to purify you. From all your sins, you shall be cleansed before the Lord." ([Lev. 16:30](#)).

I have usually directed these thoughts towards the individual – what it means for each person to accept atonement and to start the year with a clean slate. But this year, this message takes on added urgency for the

community. Indeed, it was the entire community that was atoned for through the rites of the Kohen Gadol. And the cleansing that he achieved was not only, or even primarily, that of forgiveness of sins. It was rather the cleansing of the Sanctuary from the impurity created by those sins. The Torah believes that sin pollutes, it attaches to what is holy, and the process of atonement begins with the removal of that pollution and the restoring of the environment to a pristine state, to a holy place, a place where God can dwell in the midst of the community.

This year has been one of terrible disruption. It has shaken the very structures of the society which we have taken to be firm and immovable. Through the cracks and fissures that have resulted we have been able to see some of the deep problems that have been hidden from our view or that we allow ourselves to so easily to ignore. Issues such as accelerating climate change, the tenacity of deep systemic racism, inequitable distribution of health care, the lack of a safety net for major segments of

society, and the politicization of science and of policies relating to public health. This is the pollution that has been clinging to the walls and getting into the floorboards of our society, a pollution caused by our sins of action and of inaction. As an individual, any one of us might bear only a small degree of responsibility for the current state of affairs, but as a local and national community, the responsibility lays squarely at our feet. The work of Yom Kippur is not to dwell on the sins of the past that have gotten us here, but to acknowledge them, and then to work together to fix what has gone wrong, to remove these injustices and corrosive forces from our house so that it can be a place that we can truly dwell and that the Divine can dwell with us.

In an unexpected way, this year might be exactly the time that we can start afresh and truly build something new, unhampered by much of the past. As the journalist George Packer recently wrote: “There are in history what you could call ‘plastic hours,’ the philosopher Gershom Scholem once said.... In such moments, an ossified social order suddenly turns pliable, prolonged stasis gives way to motion, and people dare to hope. Plastic hours are rare. They require the right alignment of public opinion, political power, and events—usually a crisis. They depend on social mobilization and leadership. They can come and

go unnoticed or wasted. Nothing happens unless you move. Are we living in a plastic hour? It feels that way... the philosophical questions brought on by despair allow us to reimagine what kind of country we can be.”

Let us see this Yom Kippur as granting us a ‘plastic hour.’ An opportunity to shape and build our personal lives unhampered by mistakes of or guilt from the past. And a communal opportunity, to identify those parts of our society that have been polluted, and to replace it with systems and structures that will ensure a society that is more equitable and caring, that fosters a sense of unity and community, and that is committed to the well-being of all its members and the planet on which we live. Let us all work together to make this happen.

Gmar Chatimah Tovah!



For more of Rabbi Linzer on the parsha, tune in to Parsha in Progress, where he discusses and debates the parsha with noted author Abigail Pogrebin.

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