

Yom Kippur, 5781
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Some people are simply better at disciplining than others. I recall a night when, after repeatedly asking some of my children to stop coming out of their beds after bedtime, I needed to up the ante and start imposing punishments for their ongoing noncompliance. I was ready to let them have it. I crossed my arms, put on my strictest parenting face, and launched into my firmest scolding tone. Just as I began admonishing them that this behavior was wholly unacceptable and that I would be taking away a treat, one of my children made a funny face at me, and I immediately broke down in laughter. My cover was blown. The mask of the strict disciplining parent had been abruptly pulled off my face, and I was exposed as a complete fake, with all the austerity, firmness, and reprimanding being nothing more than an act. Beneath it all, there was only love. Endless love.

Yom Kippur is the holiday of endless love. It is the time when G-d, so to speak, removes His own mask, to be realized as the parent who has been on His children's side all along. We stop and recognize that beneath all the warnings, all the threats, and all the punishments that are delineated in the Torah to help perfect us, there is only unconditional love. We attain a most profound awareness that even though there may be much pain in our lives that we cannot and will not ever understand, G-d could never actually be against us. Even so-called punishments are never vindictive or rageful, no matter how good a front is put on. It is thus understandable why the Mishnah (Taanit 4:8) teaches “לא היו ימים טובים לישראל כחמשה עשר באב וכיום הכיפורים”, conceptually linking Yom Kippur with the holiday of Tu B'Av, a day known for matchmaking and marriages. To the extent that Tu B'Av represents the ultimate day of romance between people, Yom Kippur represents the ultimate day of love between mankind and Hashem. It is thus also most appropriate that we conclude the day with the profound affirmation seven times that “ה הוא האלוקים” even when G-d reveals Himself as אלוקים, the Divine name associated with justice, He is always truly ה (Y-H-V-H), the Divine name of compassion and love.

This sense of Divine love and closeness expresses itself in almost every facet of the day. As the emissary of the Jewish people, the Kohen Gadol's entry to the קודש הקודשים, the inner sanctum of the Temple that was off-limits any other day of the year, represents the ultimate intimacy between G-d and His people. Moreover, while the Sadducees required the Kohen Gadol to ignite the pan of incense into a thick plume of smoke before entering the קודש הקודשים (Yoma 19b), presumably so as to create some

symbolic smoke barrier between him and the Divine, the accepted Halacha required the Kohen Gadol to enter the sanctum bare of any such barriers, representing an unobstructed closeness, and only after entering did he ignite the incense. Similarly, the Talmud (Yoma 20a) teaches that the Satan, an allegory for the distance that exists between G-d and His people, has no power on Yom Kippur, as such obstructions between us and the Divine are removed on this day. Rashi (Yoma 43b) writes that on Yom Kippur, the Kohen Gadol would uniquely walk up the center of the ramp to the Altar, symbolic of our status on this day as a “בן בית” or household member, of G-d Himself, who walks straight in. It is also for this reason that on Yom Kippur, the Kohen Gadol was given a unique license to pronounce the Tetragrammaton, Y-H-V-H, ten times. This four letter name of G-d constitutes the holiest and most personal name of G-d, and, not coincidentally, represents G-d's trait of compassion and love. While this name was rarely ever permitted to be pronounced because of the inexpressible sanctity and love contained within it, on Yom Kippur, the sense of closeness and love with G-d was so great that it could be articulated ten times.

The unconditional love of Yom Kippur expresses itself most saliently in the concept of Teshuva and forgiveness. While human law is founded upon notions of strict justice, Divine law elevates love over fairness. The magic of Teshuva -- that a person's past missteps can not only be pardoned, but actually transformed into merits -- is among the greatest gifts that G-d can give mankind. So many people spend their lives tormented by the irreversible failures of the past, wishing that they could somehow go back in time and undo that which cannot be undone. Teshuva signifies that true love can overcome anything. No matter how low a person has fallen in life, the Almighty's love is simply too great to allow him or her to remain in such a state. We thus fast on Yom Kippur not as a conciliatory gesture to appease an angry G-d, but rather as an ideally self-imposed expression of how much we value the Divine love, how foolish we were to have stepped away from His love, and how far we are willing to go from our end to reinstate His love into our lives. Fasting becomes an entirely different experience when it is a self-desired expression of תשובה מאהבה, repentance from love, as opposed to a fearful appeasement to avoid punishment.

How we perceive G-d affects everything in our life. People who perceive an angry and vengeful G-d will themselves be prone to frustration and negativity, both towards others as well as towards themselves. By contrast, people who experience G-d's unconditional love will naturally be gentler towards themselves, and will radiate this love towards others in their lives. The goal of a teacher of Torah must always be to enable

others to, in Talmudic parlance (Chagigah 26b), “ראו חיבתכם לפני המקום” -- see how beloved you are in the eyes of the Almighty. While our loving relationship with the Divine must always, especially during these times, be tempered with an appropriate sense of *יראת שמים*, reverence and awe, one must never forget the centrality of His love. “אבינו” (our Father) always precedes “מלכנו” (our King). And that’s what Yom Kippur is all about.

There is no denying that Yom Kippur will be vastly different this year. With shortened communal services in fulfillment of G-d’s desire of “והי בהם,” preserving the safety of our community, we should try to spend the extra time at home completing some of the skipped portions of the prayers -- every word of which is a gem -- along with studying Torah and reciting Tehillim. At the same time, however, the unique structure of this year provides an opportunity for sincere silent meditation and reflection upon our relationship with G-d, an inner experience that is not read from a text. Perhaps we can use this opportunity to become more conscious of G-d’s unspeakable love for us, and to perceive how even in a time of immense ongoing struggle for so many of us, we remain so overwhelmingly blessed. And in the merit of this effort, may we always feel His love and support for us in every step along our journey. אני לדודי ודודי לי.