

High Holiday Reader

5781

Yom Kippur



**Sponsored by Lisa and Jacob Buksbaum and Family
in memory of Lisa's father, Charles Honig, and brother, Gary David Honig**

גרשון דוד בן יחזקאל חיים ושיינה

יחזקאל חיים בן רות

and Jacob's parents Moses and Sarah Buksbaum

שרה גיטל בת יוחנן וגולדה

משה בן נתן מרדכי ומלכה

Everybody is a Somebody, October 6, 1965 (selections)

Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm, zt"l

The sainted Hafetz Hayyim told of the first time he saw a train. Who, he wondered, guides this train? Who drives it? At first, he saw very busy and official-looking people with big red caps carrying things to and from the baggage cars. Surely, he thought, these important people are the masters of the train. Then, when he discovered they were merely porters, "red caps," he noticed a big, dignified looking gentleman in an impressive uniform collecting tickets from people. No doubt, he thought, this official owns the train-- how important and solemn he appears. But when he learned he was only the ticket-collector, he turned to the man in resplendent uniform and of bushy mustache and booming voice who came marching stridently through the cars blowing a whistle. Certainly he guides the train. But no, he was merely the conductor. Perhaps, then, it is collectively owned and operated by all those aristocratic people in the parlor car who are so well-dressed and smoke expensive cigars? No, they are only passengers. Then he came to the front car, the engine room. There he saw a man in overalls, one who seemed bedraggled, who needed a shave, who looked impoverished and insignificant, who appeared to be a manual laborer and shoved coal into the fire and pulled a few rusty switches... And he -- this inconspicuous, anonymous, obscure fellow -- he was the master of the train, upon him depended the safety of the whole train and all its passengers! The *na'ar katan* often plays the great roles!

That, my friends, is the nature of the message of Yom Kippur. And that is my plea to you this holy day. Do not imagine that only the great and dramatic events are significant. In the eyes of God and in the eyes of history we too are important if we but do all we can. For nobody is a "nobody." And everybody is a "somebody" -- unless, of course, we choose to abdicate that role, that function, that responsibility.

The people we shall soon memorialize in the Yizkor may not have been famous people. Maybe they did not shake worlds. But each and every one in some measure, whether large or small, has influenced the world or some part of it. They influenced us. We influence our children, or others' children. And they, in turn, will influence others. The fact that we are here today is a tribute to them; had one link in the chain of generations been severed, we would not be Jews congregating in this *makom kadosh* today. In appreciating, therefore, the impact of the lives of our loved ones upon us, we must consider the kind of influence we shall have over the generations that will follow us. For everyone has some influence. We must, then, watch our step whether we like it or not; we cannot journey through life without leaving footprints, and others will follow where we go because we have marked the way.

That influence, that direction of our footprints, will be spelled out not in wealth, not in power, not in worldly fame. It will be exercised in the manner and the responsibility with which each of us carries out his assigned tasks in life. Whether we are anonymous lads, playing a supporting role in some great drama, or shabbily dressed conductors, directly guiding the destiny of hundreds of fellow-passengers through life, we must be aware of our importance in the eyes of God and those who shall come after us.

Thus, and only thus, shall we emerge from death to life, from oblivion to significance. For everybody -- is a somebody.

Rabbi Akiva's Reward

Rabbi Noach Goldstein

Rabbi Noach Goldstein serves as the Rosh Beit Midrash of the YU Torah Mitzion Kollel of Chicago.

In the Chumash, the person most closely identified with Yom Kippur is Aharon, the high priest, but I would argue that in the post-temple era the person most associated with Yom Kippur is R. Akiva:

- Masechet Yoma concludes the laws of Yom Kippur with R. Akiva's celebrated statement that Israel is praiseworthy for it merits to stand before God on Yom Kippur and be purified by him.
- Yom Kippur is a day of teshuvah, hope, and renewal, and R. Akiva was both the baal teshuvah and the optimist par excellence, completely remaking his personality at the age of 40 and finding signs of promise even as his colleagues weep witnessing the ruins of the Second Temple.
- According to the ancient rabbinic and geonic literature, R. Akiva was killed right before Yom Kippur.
- And in a little while (or maybe a medium while) we're going to revisit R. Akiva when we read the piyut *עשרה הרוגי מלכות* about the *עשרה הרוגי מלכות* *אלה אזכרה* about the ten martyrs who were savagely murdered by the Romans, most famously including R. Akiva. It's the one moment of the Yom Kippur davening that gets to me every year.

There's a line in the piyut where the Romans gruesomely execute the great sage R. Yishmael Kohen Gadol, and the angels react by crying out to God *זו תורה וזו שכרה* – is this the reward for Torah? And Hashem responds to them, "Quiet! This is my decree." The source for that line in the piyut though is actually a story in the Gemara, or more accurately, a blend of two stories in the Gemara, about the execution of R. Akiva. But there's a critical problem with the story. Those here studying daf yomi will recall that a couple of weeks ago we studied Daf 29b in Masechet Menachot, which describes the classic narrative of Moshe Rabbeinu ascending Har Sinai to receive the Torah, where he sees Hashem fixing crowns to some of the letters, as we have in our Torah scrolls to this day. Hashem explains to Moshe that a man by the name of Akiva ben Yosef will one day derive heaps and heaps of halakhot from these crowns. Moshe is amazed and asks to see this person, and Hashem grants him a vision of R. Akiva teaching in the beit medrash.

Moshe exits the vision and returns to where he was before God, and he's absolutely blown away by what he saw. Forget about the burning bush or the splitting of the sea; watching R. Akiva teach Torah is the most awesome thing Moshe has ever seen. So he turns to Hashem first he asks, Ribbono Shel Olam, I think you have the wrong man—R. Akiva should be standing here to receive the Torah! Hashem says be quiet, this is what I've decided, just as we recite in the piyut. Ok. But then Moshe asks Ribbono Shel Olam, "הראיתיני תורתו הראני שכרו" – you've shown me R. Akiva's Torah, now show me R. Akiva's reward! Once again Hashem promptly gives Moshe a vision—and what Moshe sees is the Romans weighing R. Akiva's flesh after they flayed him alive. Moshe exits the vision horrified and cries out to God, זו תורה וזו שכרה? This is R. Akiva's reward? And again God answers him, Quiet, this is what I've decided.

Do you see the problem though? Moshe asked God to see R. Akiva's reward. So what should he have seen? What should his vision have been? R. Akiva sitting in the World to Come, in Gan Eden, teaching in the Heavenly Academy! That's R. Akiva's reward! Why on earth does Hashem answer Moshe's request by showing him R. Akiva's death? And why does Moshe react with such theological shock instead of asking once more to see R. Akiva's reward?

I would like to suggest two possible solutions that I think give us something to think about as we prepare for the core of the Yom Kippur davening, Yizkor and Mussaf.

Number one. When Moshe Rabbeinu asked God to show him R. Akiva's reward, he did not refer to R. Akiva's portion in the World to Come. That's not an interesting question. Moshe can safely assume that it's incredibly high, and up on Har Sinai he can't afford to waste a minute on questions that he knows the answer to. Moshe wants to know about R. Akiva's legacy in this world.

In R. Akiva, Moshe sees a kindred spirit, and for good reason. Moshe Rabbeinu is easily the person with the greatest sense of mission and responsibility in Tanach. He is an Atlasian figure, singlehandedly tasked with leading a nation of stubborn and scattered slaves out of Egypt, teaching them the Torah, and bringing them to the Holy Land. It's a terrible burden, demanding massive sacrifice from Moshe. Moshe has accepted that reality, he's come to terms with what his life will look like, but he still holds one condition. Hashem I'm willing to pour my heart and soul into the work as long as long as at the end of it all I have the chance to step back and enjoy the fruits of my labor.

Moshe recognizes that R. Akiva's responsibilities are just as demanding. He spends a lifetime laboring in the forge of the תורה שבעל פה, dedicating his life to the development and dissemination of Torah in a generation reeling from the destruction of Jerusalem and ravaged by the unending Roman persecution. It requires him to leave his idyllic life as a shepherd, requires

him to make sacrifices in his personal life and that of his family, and to do it all in the face of hateful enemies and false friends. So Moshe asks, “God, you showed me R. Akiva’s Torah, now show me his reward—let me see R. Akiva at the end surrounded by his family and his students, ready at last to put down his burden secure in the knowledge that his life’s purpose was fully realized.”

And that is exactly what Hashem tells Moshe cannot be guaranteed. R. Akiva will get his reward in the World to Come, so will Moshe, but the world below is a complicated place, and Moshe’s one condition to expect a happy ending is unacceptable. Moshe, you have to give everything without a guarantee that you will live to bring the people into Eretz Canaan and witness the completion of your task, just as R. Akiva will see his life’s work cut short by the Roman executioners.

One of the most elemental human desires is to see the fruits of our labor, to know that the work we’ve put in has been rewarded with the consequences. We expect it naturally and think it fair to demand it theologically. And yet so often it does not work that way. That’s true on the more mundane level, the slights and frustrations and disappointments we absorb throughout the year as our work goes unrecognized and unappreciated, but on far more profound levels as well. Parents who deserved to celebrate family semachot, who put their entire lives into raising families but are taken away before they could celebrate births and bar mitzvahs and graduations and weddings with their children and grandchildren. Spouses who built a life together but who are taken from each other with so much left to see. And רחמנא ליצילן parents who have to bury a child, forever mourning the person they were never able to see grow up.

R. Akiva looms over Yom Kippur to remind us one stark truth. That just as we invoke Hashem’s mercy even though it’s beyond our comprehension, so too we must submit ourselves to Hashem’s judgment as well, something that even Moshe Rabbeinu could not understand. But I think there’s a second piece to the R. Akiva story as well. Read the Gemara literally: Moshe asks God to show him R. Akiva’s reward. God doesn’t answer, “Sorry, no reward to show you”—instead He says ok and shows him the Romans weighing R. Akiva’s flesh. Apparently, somehow, this is R. Akiva’s reward! How on earth can that be? And that’s Moshe’s literal response: וזו תורה וזו שכרה? This is the reward?

The answer though is that Moshe couldn’t possibly understand because he lacked the perspective of time. Living 1500 years before R. Akiva, he couldn’t possibly anticipate the legacy that R. Akiva’s end would leave. Moshe was given the vision of a snapshot in time, right after R. Akiva’s death. But looking back now we have nearly 1900 years of Jewish history documenting the inspiration that Jews have drawn from R. Akiva’s courage faith. The Romans thought that they were bringing R. Akiva’s life’s purpose to an ignominious end; they had no idea that they were providing him with the opportunity to widen and deepen its realization across the millennia

and across the globe, long after the collapse of Rome's religion and the fall of its empire. From Moshe's ancient perspective he could not see this, from the Romans' myopic perspective they failed to see this, but history gave us the answer to Moshe's question, the answer that Hashem of course knew all along.

Rabbi Berman spoke here the other night about how we hold in our hands the legacy of the people who molded us. We're able to daven on their behalf because our success is a fresh instantiation of their accomplishments. The mitzvot that we perform demonstrate the success of parents, grandparents, and teachers in raising us, vindicates their decisions, determines their legacy. The past is not dead; it is shaped and defined by the present and the future. On Yom Kippur especially we must recognize the gifts our forbearers bestowed upon us, and the responsibility we owe them in return.

Naturally, R. Akiva, the consummate optimist, was able to recognize this. He sensed the opportunity he was given as the Romans approached and he prepared to say the Shema, surrendering control of his legacy to his onlooking students. Those students answered the challenge, as they became giants of the Mesorah in their own right. R. Meir, R. Yehuda, R. Shimon – men who form the backbone of the Mishna. As we prepare for Yizkor and the continuation of the Yom HaDin, let us reflect on the responsibilities that we have been given by our predecessors, and resolve that we too succeed in securing their legacies this coming year and beyond.

The Book and the Sword

Rabbi Dr. Yosie Levine

On Yom Kippur, we take nothing for granted. Everything – every word – every part of the davening– is pregnant with meaning. Every moment on Yom Kippur is so precious.

And there is something deeply stirring and powerful about Kol Nidrei. But there is something a little peculiar. Unlike the rest of the davening – the chazzanat Kol Nidrei is not alone. He's surrounded – flanked on either side by people standing to his right and left. On one reading, the Chazzan on Yom Kippur night is Moshe Rabbeinu fighting the war against Amalek. Staff in hand, when Moshe would lift his hands to the heavens, the tide of the battle would turn and the Jewish people would begin to vanquish their enemies. And when Moshe's arms became tired, Aharon and Chur stood at his side to hold them up. This is the image we replicate: Moshe Rabbeinu at center, aided by Aharon and Chur.

The Midrash writes that book and the sword descended together – intertwined – from the heavens. The book and the sword, of course, represent two types of power in this world. The book stands for ideas, persuasion, creativity; the power of rational argument. The sword is the symbol of physical strength, coercion, political domination.

On the face of it, it appears that these are the two images of Yom Kippur: In the first instance, we stand before a heavenly tribunal pleading to be inscribed in the write book. In the second, we place our men of war on the field of battle.

On Yom Kippur, we make two appeals to Hashem: One is the appeal of the book: We make arguments about why God should grant us pardon and

forgiveness. But notice what we've done to the second image – to the image of the sword. We've recreated the part of the battlefield where in fact there is no sword at all. It's not Moshe's sword that he lifts, but his staff. In prayer, he and the Jewish people turn to Hashem. Moshe raises his staff toward the heavens –and that is what produces victory. That is the second image we place in our minds as we enter Yom Kippur. As we come before Hashem today, we come to him –not with the book and the sword – but with the book the staff: We make one appeal on the basis of

rational logic; we make another on the basis of simple love. Perhaps the book is not enough; perhaps our arguments are not compelling enough. So we put our hands up and ask Hashem to love us.

Rav Chaim Ozer Grodzensky once asked his dear friend and colleague Rav Eliyahu Chaim Meisels why he never made the time to compose a book of his Talmudic and halachic insights, which would certainly be a merit for him in the World to Come. Rav Meizels, who was well-known for his tireless efforts to assist the poor and downtrodden, pulled out some old, dusty ledgers containing the details of all of the charity and loans he had dispersed. “These are the books that I prefer to take with me before the Heavenly Court,”he said.

But when our books fail, we turn to the staff. We ask Hashem to deal kindly with us not because we are deserving; but because we are undeserving.

May Hashem answer all of our prayers and may this Yom Kippur usher in a year of good tidings and good fortune for our community, for our families, and the Jewish people.

Failure and Fraudulence: Two Models of Imperfect Teshuva
Rabbi Dovid Zirkind, 5775 (2014)

Dear Rabbi,

Wanted to know your thoughts on teshuva as we approach Yom Kippur. Specifically, how am I supposed to feel like I am doing true teshuva if I know that I will continue to do some of these things? Yes there are small things that I will try to improve on and hopefully that will make me a be/er person overall, but in the meantime isn't vidoy and al chet just lip service? In fact one of the al chets we say is for insincere vidoy, which is exactly how I feel...

I think the question is so powerful. The Mishna in the end of Mesechet Yoma states: the only person that doesn't have the ability to do Teshuva is the person who says, "I can sin because I have Teshuva to back me up." But in one sense, is that not all of us? Are we honestly saying that 5775 is going to be perfect? And if we're honest with ourselves that we will end up sinning in the year to come than what right do we have approach Yom Kippur again next year with the sins we saw coming?

The neuroscience field has been a buzz lately with a series of new findings about the way kindness is processed in the brain and on the molecular level. Subjecting charitable givers to fMRI scans, researchers at the Rehabilitation Institute in Chicago discovered that two areas of the brain are activated when a person gives to others and they are not the areas you'd expect. The first was the area in the frontal lobe associated with building social relationships and the second was lower in the midbrain, the same area where pleasure circuits are active, like when we eat something delicious or are surprised with an exciting gift. When we give we are building connections but also feeling good about it.

Dr. Jordan Grafman who ran the study wrote:

“While we often tend to think of altruism as a kind of sophisticated moral capacity we use to squelch our urges to dominate others, this new evidence suggests that giving is actually inherently rewarding: The brain churns out a pleasurable response when we engage in it.”

At UCLA, the team that studies Gene profiles came to a very similar conclusion. They identified a paCern where as those whose happiness comes from a sense of higher purpose tend to have healthier, less inflamed protein production while those whose happiness is hedonistically driven had an increased amount of biological markers that lead to inflammation that causes cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and even cancer. In other words, the bodies of those who live more selfless lives tend to be responding by causing them to function better.

The philosophical question being raised, as a result of all this is, are we programmed or built to do good? The Darwinians have always argued that primarily man looks to promote and protect himself but the idea that giving would be psychologically and physiologically healthy is leading some to question that assumption. The Torah’s view is somewhere in between.

Regarding a sinners offering the Midrash writes: Initially it was Hashem’s intention to interact solely with the tzaddik, the perfect person, but all that changed. Our Torah is the Toras Hasham, the bible of the man who does both mitzvos and aveiros. The Chumash associates this transition with the generation of Noach. In His promise to not repeat the destruction of the flood, Hashem says to Noach – *Yetzer lev haadam rah m’niurav* – meaning it is likely that man will sin again, and G-d committed to not act as harshly as he did before. We are challenged with a Yetzer Hara and we are human; inevitably then, we can not expect to be perfect.

Therefore, to me, the goal of Yom Kippur is not a naïve commitment to being perfect, but rather a process of setting the goals we aspire to and the values we believe in. We can’t fast every day, but we show ourselves, if only temporarily, how much we can achieve today. We aren’t fooling anyone into thinking that my Yom Kippur persona is the real me, but it is the part of me that I am most proud of. *Echteh V’aShuv* – I will sin and I will repent - is a person who sees his personality as the lowest common denominator of all his actions. He is a sinner, which will never change, even when he repents. On Yom Kippur we say the opposite; we sin, but we are holier - greater than the sum of our mistakes.

Yizkor: Looking Ahead by Looking Back, Yom Kippur, 2005 (Selections)
Rabbi Dr. Ari Berman

I remember when I first realized that my father was not Superman. I was a teenager at the time and my father just had surgery. In those days laparoscopic surgery was not an option, so surgery meant a serious incision with significant recovery time. I remember walking into the hospital room after the surgery and seeing my father in a weakened, almost frail state. I was stunned. While I never consciously formulated the thought somewhere in my subconscious I imagined my father as the strongest, toughest man I knew. Like most boys, my subconscious envisioned my father to have qualities that he could not have possessed and that day was when my subconscious collided with reality - and it was shocking. But while it was shocking and somewhat sad, it was also the day that I began to grow up.

There is a fascinating debate about one of the core prayers we recite on Yom Kippur. What is the prayer we repeat most often today? *Viduy* - confession. All throughout the day we confess. We have a list of sins in the *al chet*, and we recite the paragraph of *ashamnu, bagadnu* very often as well. There is one part of the *viduy* service that the gemara teaches us is the *ikar viduy*, the essential part of confession. Which part? *Aval anachnu chatanu* – but we have sinned. Right before we start *ashamnu, bagadnu* – we recite this three word phrase which is considered by the Sages as the essential part of *viduy*. Interestingly, there is a debate in the commentaries if this phrase consists of three or four words. There are some versions of this phrase in which the word *ve-avotenu* is included: *aval anachnu ve-avotenu chatanu* - but we and our fathers have sinned. Some *machzorim* contain the version mentioning our father's sins, and other *machzorim* print the other version and leave it out. But how are we to understand the version that mentions our fathers' sins.

Why at this time are we confessing that our father has sinned as well? What does this have to do with us? Why bring our parents' sins into the picture when we are doing *viduy* for our own misdeeds? The commentaries explain that this word references the sins that we inherited or

learned from our parents. We are not confessing our father's sins as much as we are confessing our sins that we do because of our father. Using this interpretation, I would suggest that this version teaches us some very important lessons about ourselves and the process of teshuvah as personal transformation.

1) The first lesson is that our parents are imperfect and that they have sinned in their lives. It is common for a child to grow up and think his or her parents are perfect, and the moment one realizes that it is not the case is very painful and difficult. But still the realization is crucial. For if one remains stuck in one's fantasy, then one's own self image and the image of the people to whom one is close will never match up to the fictional image of one's parents. As such, the child will remain stunted by this imaginary depiction of perfection and will have a difficult time finding happiness. In Bereshit we are told that a man must leave his father's and mother's house and cling to his wife. This does not just mean physically leaving the house, but psychologically too. Part of growing up and leading happy, fulfilling lives is leaving behind the childish image of one's parents. But besides the need for personal happiness, if one does not alter one's fictionalized vision of one's parents, one will never develop a real relationship with them.

One will have a relationship with an image or a figment of one's imagination, but not the real person. The first lesson of mentioning one's father's sins is to internalize that they are not perfect.

2) The second lesson is that we are products of our rearing. While we have independent qualities, traits, dispositions, likes and dislikes, still so much of who we are is a response to our rearing. Whether it is a positive response of imitation or a rebellious response that pushes us in the opposite direction, so much of our identity is affected by our upbringing. This is true for our good qualities and it is also true of the negative ones. *Aval anachnu ve-avotenu chatanu* – there are sins that we come to on our own and there are other sins that we commit in response to our parents.

3) The third lesson is rooted in the word *aval* – but. What does it mean when we say “but we have sinned?” Targum Unkelos translates the word *aval* to mean *b'kushta* not just “but” rather “the truth is.” One can come up with many excuses for our actions: insecurities, innate weaknesses, simple mistakes. One of the more common excuses is to blame one's rearing. There are people who spend their entire lives blaming all of their ills and all of their misdeeds on their upbringing and their parents. But the *viduy* says “*aval*.” With all of the baggage and all of the personal issues, still the truth is that I sinned. I am responsible. Except for rare instances in which one literally loses one's ability to choose because of past trauma, the truth is that I am responsible for my actions. Even though we all have personal baggage, we have the ability to

overcome them and determine our path in life. Yes my parents are imperfect and my rearing flawed in some way, but in the end, I am not crippled. I am responsible for my actions. *Aval* - with all of the excuses, ultimately I am the master of my fate and the captain of my soul.