

As we begin Yom Kippur, I want to take this opportunity to wish you and your families a *g'mar chasima tova*. May we all be inscribed and sealed in the *Sefer Hachaim*—the Book of Life--and be granted *selicha* and *mechila*, full atonement, on this day, together with the rest of *Klal Yisrael*.

Yom Kippur is the day designated to think deeply about our lives. About what God expects from us. About what we should expect from ourselves. And in that context, to think about our shortcomings—our sins and failures over the past year—and to commit to improve ourselves, and to live the way we were meant to live, to achieve our potential.

Ten times during the *tefilla*, we will engage in *vidui*. We will list our sins—*ashamnu, bagadnu, gazalnu, dibarnu dofi*...and so forth. We will think in a very detailed way about what we have done wrong. *Al cheit chachatanu lifanecha*...Oy. ..all the *chataim*, the sins, we committed.

But the truth is, we recite these detailed lists every year. Does it make the drastic difference we hope for? We need to think tonight about the root cause of sin. What is it in our lives that allows this to happen? Why don't we just do what is expected of us? Is it really so hard?

I think one important word in our *tefillos* teaches us an important lesson about the root cause of sin. Throughout the davening, we will use three terms to describe sin-- עון, פשע, חטא—the three most common Biblical Hebrew words for sin. These are the three types of sin--unintentional sin (חטא), brazen sin (פשע), and rebellious sin (עון).

But tonight, the first time we mention the word **sin** on the night of Kol Nidrei, we use the term **aveira**. It is rabbinic Hebrew. The 12th century **Rokeach** writes that עבירה is Chazal's generic term for all types of sins.

ספר השם עמוד קפ : ויש ה' מיני לשון עבירה, עון א. חטא ב. פשע ג. אשמה ד. מעילה ה

We begin our davening saying

בישיבה של מעלה ובישיבה של מטה--הנני מבקש רשות להתפלל עם העברינים

We request permission of the *Beis Din* in Heaven and on Earth to join in prayer with *avaryanim*—those who commit *aveiros*.

Why did Chazal use this particular term of עבירה to describe sins? And why do we use that term tonight—at the beginning of Yom Kippur?

The word *aveira* comes from the Hebrew root “*avar*,” which means **to simply pass by—without even noticing**. When we commit an *aveira*, it means that we did not take the time to consider our actions, to put proper thought into the way we treat God and other people. It implies a level of carelessness, a level of indifference and disinterest.

This lack of attention may seem quite innocuous. It is not malicious or premeditated, but it is, in fact, **very dangerous**. Because the *avaryan*, the indifferent person, to a large extent, ignores God and his fellow man altogether. **He simply doesn't care enough to pay attention**. He does not consider it a priority to think before he acts, to analyze his actions, and the way he treats others, or the care and consideration he shows to Hashem. He simply closes his eyes, to God and others, and to his responsibilities, as he walks nonchalantly through the journey of life.

The **Ramchal** discusses this in Chapter 2 of *Mesilas Yesharim*, when discussing *zehirus*, translated as watchfulness, attention, and vigilance.

הנה ענין הזהירות הוא שיהיה האדם נזהר במעשיו ובעניניו, כלומר, מתבונן ומפקח על מעשיו ודרכיו, הטובים הם אם לא, לבלתי עזוב נפשו לסכנת האבדון חס וחלילה ולא ילך במהלך הרגלו כעור באפלה.

The essence of zehirus is for one to be cautious of his actions and affairs, namely, contemplating and monitoring his actions and his ways in life, to determine whether they are good or evil; so that he not abandon his soul to the danger of destruction, G-d forbid, and not simply proceed through life following his routines and habits, like a blind man walking in the dark.

וההולך בעולמו בלי התבוננות אם טובה דרכו או רעה, הנה הוא כסומא ההולך על שפת הנהר אשר סכנתו ודאי עצומה ורעתו קרובה מהצלתו. כי אולם חסרון השמירה מפני העורון הטבעי או מפני העורון הרצוני דהיינו סתימת העינים בבחירה וחפץ, אחד הוא.

One who travels through his world without contemplating whether his ways are good or evil is similar to a blind man walking on the bank of a river. His danger is certainly very great and his misfortune is more likely than his salvation. For negligence in guarding oneself from danger due to natural blindness and negligence due to willful blindness, namely shutting one's eyes by choice and preference is one and the same.

והנה ירמיהו היה מתאונן על רוע בני דורו מפני היותם נגועים בנגע המדה הזאת, שהיו מעלימים עיניהם ממעשיהם בלי שישימו לב לראות מה הם: הלהעשות אם להעזב?

Yirmiyahu bemoaned the corruption of the people of his generation on account of their being afflicted with the plague of this trait. They would turn a blind eye to their deeds, without paying attention to consider what they were doing, whether to do or refrain from doing it.

שהיו רודפים והולכים במרוצת הרגלם ודרכיהם מבלי שיניחו זמן לעצמם לדקדק על המעשים והדרכים, ונמצא שהם נופלים ברעה בלי ראות אותה.

They raced along on the path of life, following the momentum of habit and routine, without leaving themselves time to consider their deeds and ways. Thus, they fell into evil without even seeing it.

And this is so tragic—because all it takes to live properly is a small amount of care and attention.

It means that we are so often consumed by our material goals and ambitions, our woes and concerns, our pleasures and pains, what Ramchal terms הרגלם במרוצת “racing along following our habits and familiar paths,” borrowing from the Navi Yirmiyahu who accused his generation of being כסוס שוטף במלחמה like a horse racing in war, implying that we do not spend even a few seconds considering God or our fellow man. We do not consider our ethical obligations, our religious duties, and our moral imperatives. We do not think before we act...

What Chazal teach us by creating a new term and labeling all sins as *aveiros* is that **indifference, and a lack of reflection, a lack of caring, is the cardinal sin of mankind.** We simply don't take the few seconds necessary to be mindful of our obligations.

At the root of all sins is *the great sin* that has plagued our people for centuries. It is the sin of *aveira*--indifference, people who live life “passing God and fellow man by”

This is a sad state of affairs. We all know what we should do, but we just don't take the time to think about how to make that happen. We all know we should study more, we should talk less during *davening*, we should be more patient and tolerant of others, we should give more *tzedaka*, we should do more *chessed*, we should dedicate more time to help others.

So why don't we do it?

It would be one thing if we were ideologically opposed to these ideas, but that's certainly not the case. Rather, how sad and tragic it is that we just don't stop to think...take a few seconds to plan, and think, and contemplate our actions.

As **Ramchal** continues:

שאלולי היו שמים לבם כמעט קט על דרכיהם, ודאי שמיד היו מתחילים להנחם ממעשיהם, והיתה החרטה הולכת ומתגברת בהם עד שהיו עוזבים החטא לגמרי .

if they were to put their ways to heart even the slightest bit, certainly they would immediately begin to feel regret for their deeds. The remorse would go and intensify within them until they would abandon the sin completely.

Tonight, Kol Nidrei night, is the night to open our eyes—and start thinking. To stop walking through life with our eyes closed. Accordingly, we invite *avaryanim* (sinners), **a category we all fit into--to break free from our apathy and care more about what we do; to think more about our actions. It is the time to internalize that we cannot simply pass through our lives and avert our attention from God and our fellow man.**

The Kol Nidrei prayer on Yom Kippur night should awaken within all Jews the desire to do *teshuva*, to come home to Hashem, and to be faithful to who we really are. To open our eyes!

Kol Nidrei, annulling vows, is a reminder to act now, to really change. It reminds us to find the inner strength to **do** what is right, and not just think about it or promise it.

But it starts with us—with **our** making a real change—not just promising, not just committing, but taking actions—doing something. Starting tonight.

It is time to make real changes. It is time to introduce more mindfulness and awareness into our lives...

But we often lack the motivation to change. We say to ourselves: Does it really matter? We feel that we are just "**ordinary**" men and women. In the grand scheme of things, do our actions really make such a difference? What can we do about the really great and momentous issues in the world in general and in the Jewish community in particular?

Many times, these thoughts occur to us as a “way out”—an escape hatch--from the terrible responsibility urged on us by Yom Kippur, as a way to proclaim our lack of responsibility and to issue a declaration of powerlessness. We wrongly assume that it is only the leaders and the heroes who play a role in history. **But in truth, Yom Kippur reminds us that it is not only the great and the famous upon whom the world rests.**

The fact that God tells each of us to repent, that He cares about each person’s actions, shows that even those who may appear insignificant are so very important! **History is the accumulation of actions by thousands upon thousands of ordinary people, who may never be aware of the significance of their own deeds.** The great issues are decided, in the long run, not by those in the headlines, but by the thousands of "ordinary people" who do or do not follow the dictates of conscience.

The revelation at **Har Sinai** was not experienced only by Moshe and the seventy elders. Instead, all Jews—**three million strong**--were there. All these “ordinary people” played a vital role in the formation of the Jewish nation.

The **State of Israel** was not built only by the David Ben Gurions and the Moshe Sharets and the Levi Eshkols alone. Rather, it was built as well by hundreds of young men and women, volunteers of the Hagana, whose names are not well known, who died on the battlefield. It was built by the parents who let their sons and daughters leave Russia for the malarial swamps of

Palestine. And it was built by the thousands in the Diaspora who collected coins for the Jewish National Fund. All of these “ordinary people” played a vital role in establishing the State of Israel.

In the 1980s, **Russian Jews** were not freed only because of the requests of a few powerful people, but also because hundreds of thousands of Jews throughout the world joined together in solidarity—and made their voices heard. Again, all of these “ordinary people” played a vital role in freeing Russian Jewry.

The great **Yeshivas and Jewish day schools** are flourishing today, not only because of the dedication of a handful of brilliant and dedicated *roshei yeshiva*, but because thousands of ordinary parents are choosing to send their children to get a Jewish education. All of these “ordinary people” are playing a role in the dramatic explosion of Torah study and Jewish education in the last half century.

Our shuls, as well, which serve as the center of Jewish communal life, were built not only by dedicated and talented rabbis and committed lay leaders, but also by dozens of deeply committed individuals and families, ordinary people—men and women—who banded together, rolled up their sleeves and made their dreams a reality, extending themselves financially, and investing their blood, sweat, toil, and tears.

When the great Book of Life is opened in Heaven, as we read in the *U-nesaneh Tokef*, it may be true that *malachim yehafezun*, that sublime angels rush about and create a stir, but who is in the Book: **וְהוֹתֵם יָד כָּל אָדָם בּוֹ**; it is each and every human being who is found within. Each person’s own individual signature is recorded therein. Each of us—each man and woman--has our own mission. That is what we must do: no more--but also no less.

And whether or not our names are inscribed on great monuments or in history books, we are important. That is the theme of responsibility taught to us by Yom Kippur. Each of us could have done more in our own little way; it is when we fail that we must say *al cheit* and confess our failure. On that and on that alone are we judged during the *Yamim Noraim*. And our role is more significant than it may appear...

Never underestimate how **your** conduct, and your actions, can change a life and change the world. How you as a Jew act in your profession can have a great effect on the world. How you act as a customer in a store. How you act as a neighbor. How you relate to your parents, your spouse, your children, your family and friends. Never underestimate the power of a small gesture! A kind word to a person who is lonely, a smile to someone who needs a friend, a compliment to someone who lacks confidence, a bit of encouragement to a child unsure of himself. We may not realize it, but such little things really can make a difference. All the more reason, therefore, to feel personally responsible when we forget to offer that word, that smile, that encouragement!

If we put our minds to it, we can do it.

And we come here together as a community--to inspire one another. Our shul brings us together to remind us of what we can accomplish when each of us does our part—the beautiful *tefillos*, *chessed*, and Torah that happens here reminds us.

A story from the **Medrash** (Breishis Rabba 65:22) illustrates the extraordinary power of the *Beis Hamikdash* when it stood and, by extension, the power of our shuls. which Chazal refer to as a *mikdash m'at*.

The Medrash relates an incident about the time the Romans came to destroy the *Beis HaMikdash*. They needed someone to guide them and took a Jewish traitor, Yosef Meshisa, to show them around. They told him that, as payment for the “guided tour,” he could take whatever he wanted from the *Beis HaMikdash*. After giving them a tour, he went in and took the Golden Menorah. The Romans told him that it was not appropriate for a commoner like him to have such an item in his house. “Go back and take something else — anything else, just not the Menorah.”

Yosef Meshisa replied, “I can’t go back in.” The Romans promised him that the income from the next three years of tax revenues would be his, but he persisted. “I cannot go back in. Is it not enough that I angered my G-d and defiled His Temple one time, I should have to do it again? I can’t do it.” The Romans tortured him and began to cut him up alive. He would not change his mind. And as he cried in pain, he screamed, *היה מצווה ואומר ווי אוי אוי שהכעסתי לבוראי*
"Woe is unto me. Woe is unto me for I have angered my Creator!"

The **Ponevezher Rav** asked, “What happened? What made Yosef Meshisa suddenly do Teshuvah? Although he was a Jew, he initially had no sensitivity to Jewish values. He was even willing to steal from the holy *Beis Hamikdash*. But after having violated the *Bais Hamikdash* once, he had a change of heart. He refused to go back in again and was prepared to die *al kiddush Hashem*. What transpired, what transformed him from a wicked person to a righteous person?

The Ponevezher Rav answered that simply entering a holy place transformed him. In his few moments in the *Beis Hamikdash*, he was exposed to holiness. He went into the *Beis HaMikdash* without any good intentions, but he could not help but walk out transformed, a different person. There is something real about holiness and purity. Mere exposure to the presence of the *Shechinah* can change a person for life.

Our Shul, Shomrei Emunah—the guardian of our faith—is truly the anchor of our spirituality--both intellectually and emotionally. It keeps us connected, it supports us, it inspires us. And for the past six months—even when the doors were shut—we remained connected and inspired.

I think this year we achieved new clarity about the central role of community and shul in our lives. We don’t always appreciate it, but our Shul is not just a place where hundreds of people come together every day to learn, to daven, to do *chessed*, to join together to celebrate and also to console one another. **It is our spiritual anchor...**

That is what our shul does for us. But we must ask ourselves tonight—what have we done for our Shul?

To provide the sacred space for all of these activities, the Shul has operating expenses which have greatly increased during Covid 19 to keep things safe, secure, and it depends on our support. Specifically, now on Yom Kippur, is a time to think about what we can do for our shul...I ask everyone to think during this Yom Kippur appeal, about what this shul means to you and pledge with your heart. And remember—it is really an investment in yourself and your family...in the future of the Jewish nation. Wishing everyone a *g'mar chasima tova* and a year of good health, happiness, and spiritual growth, and a return to a rebuilt Beis Hamikdash, *bimhera v'yamenu*, amen.