

The Unbearable Lightness of Yom Kippur

Rabbi Ariel Rackovsky- Yom Kippur 5777

Congregation Shaare Tefilla, Dallas, TX

Many thanks to Rabbi Shaanan Gelman of Kehillat Chovevei Tzion of Skokie, Illinois for his partnership in preparing this sermon.

It was 7 PM, and a group of nervous young men were waiting outside an apartment in Kiev. They were representatives of the Student Struggle for Soviet Jewry, and it was their first trip behind the Iron Curtain; in the group was Rabbi Elly Krinsky, now of the National Jewish Outreach Program, who told this story. The trip was two weeks in duration and they had four cities on their itinerary- in each one, they were expected to make their own plans based on a secret list they were given of whom they should meet. That evening in Kiev, they were meeting with Sergey, who was described to them as a Hebrew teacher, and after establishing contact with him, they were invited to observe a Hebrew class he was teaching. Sergey let them in, and they observed a him slowly and methodically writing letters on the board and teaching them, describing what each one was for the next 45 minutes. When they reached the letter ם, the lesson adjourned. Afterward, Rabbi Krinsky went over to speak with him. "I have to tell you that I'm a little surprised," Rabbi Krinsky said. "The class was called for an hour long and you had another fifteen minutes. Why didn't you teach another letter?" Sergey replied, "To be honest, I was in Moscow a few days ago, and I only learned ם-ס; I have not learned ן yet."

The critical importance of the Hebrew letters is the reason Sergey was so transfixed and energized by them that he wanted to teach nine letters, even if he didn't know the entire Aleph Bet yet. The power of the Hebrew Alphabet, the building block of our prayers and our Holy Torah, has captivated generations of Jews and today, on Yom Kippur, we are connecting to the Aleph Bet on many levels; the holy letters form the building blocks of the prayers and *piyyutim* we recite all day long. Many of these prayers are even organized in acrostic form, in alphabetical order. But there is another connection to Yom Kippur.

After the sin of the golden calf, our sages in the Yalkut Shimoni tell us in that the letters on the first tablets weren't destroyed; when Moshe broke the tablets, they flew away.

כתב הלוחות דכתיב וְאֶשְׂבְּרָם [1] לעיניכם לוחות משתברות ואותיות פורחות דכתיב התעיף עיניך בו ואיננו.

Rav Shlomo Ephraim Lunshitz of Prague, in his Torah commentary Kli Yakar, paints an intriguing image based on these verses. When the tablets had no letters, they became unbearably heavy; all that was left was two enormous slabs of rock, and that is when Moshe dropped them. But what happened to these letters? If they weren't destroyed, did they fly away like a balloon, floating around, so that a random passerby would be hit on the head with a flying Aleph? Did they vanish into thin air? The Kli Yakar elaborates that these very letters were unmoored, until they finally found a resting place on the second tablets. Do you know on which day that happened? Yes, those very letters- the ones which abandoned us when Bnei Yisrael rebelled against God- found their home on Yom Kippur, reset into the second tablets like a precious stone lifted from a family heirloom and reset into the ring of a new bride.

The image of Moshe crushed under the weight of those heavy, wordless stones is tragically a familiar one for many of us. Isn't it true that the acceptance of the Torah in our lives can feel like an overwhelming burden? Rather than viewing the opportunity to keep Torah and Mitzvos- something Sergey and his friends wanted so badly- as a privilege, we view it as a burden or annoyance. Think about our goal for Friday night. Is it to have a meaningful Shabbos meal with our friends and family, or is it to get into pajamas and sleep for 16 to 18 hours? Or, even better, consider the question we ask several times a year. It's the one question that unites people across the spectrum- from Ohr to Temple. "When did you finish?" I remember one year in the shul I grew up in, there was an appeal on Shmini Atzeres, and someone pledged \$10 for every minute they finished before noon. The shul netted about \$150 from that pledge. It's a race to the bottom, isn't it? We ask it each Pesach about the Seder because we want to feel better knowing some other *shmendrik* was held hostage at the Seder table longer than we were, we ask it each day of Rosh Hashanah because we are hungry, and we ask it on Yom Kippur...actually, I don't know why we ask it on Yom Kippur. Where are we going? Imagine the scene: it's in the days of the Beis Hamikdash...people are waiting and hanging on all day long, scrutinizing the Beit Hamikdash for signs of the progress of the Kohen Gadol as he performed the *Avodah*. Every single step is choreographed, even the slightest false step and consequences could be devastating. At the end of the day, with the suspense mounting, he finally emerges, radiant, flush with spiritual victory and bearing the news of divine forgiveness...Everyone is rejoicing and in the midst of the revelry, his friends ask him, "So, nu, when did you finish the *ketores*?" It's not that it's inappropriate to ask debriefing questions, so here are a few alternatives. Instead of "What time did you finish," ask "What was the highlight for you?" or "How did you feel when you

were done?” Yom Kippur, when the *luchos* became light again, challenges us to reevaluate our attitudes toward a burdensome Judaism. With an attitude adjustment, we may realize we aren’t carrying a burden at all. If we feel what we do has purpose and is imbued with transcendence, than the heaviest burden will be lightened. Rav Aharon Soloveichik zt”l suffered a stroke in 1983 that left him paralyzed on the left side of his body. Despite that, he continued his punishing regimen of meetings, extensive teaching of Torah and travelling to New York each week to deliver his Talmud shiur at YU. His grandson, Rabbi Shmuel Marcus, related that he once saw Rav Aharon ascending the enormous, grand U shaped staircase leading to the second floor of Soloveichik home, muttering something under his breath. As he forced his left foot before his right foot and ascended the 20 steps, he was saying “*Achas...Achas ve’Achas...Achas Ushtaim...*” The same thing the Kohen Gadol would say when sprinkling blood on the altar during the Yom Kippur service. Rav Aharon was in constant, relentless pain for the final eighteen years of his life, yet Rav Moshe Soloveichik, his son, said that his father viewed himself, and everything he did- indeed, literally every step he took- as an act of *avodah* no different than that performed by the Kohen Gadol on Yom Kippur, and that sense of transcendent purpose lightened and transformed his pain. If we view our own actions as imbued with purpose, if we view our relationships

But there is another powerful lesson that resonates from the words of the Kli Yakar. Simply put, our words count- our words to God, and our words to our fellow man. It is easy to think that the words of prayer we say that are meaningless or unanswered. Cynically, we write off the *Kel Maleh Rachamims* of whose efficacy we are not assured, and mouth by rote the words of the *Mi*

Shebeirach LeCholim which, so often, seems tragically rejected. I'm sure some of you have seen the Israeli TV series *Srugim*, depicting the lives of a group of religious single thirtysomethings in the heart of the the Jerusalem scene. In the 13th episode of the second season, the character named Hodaya hosts her teenage niece, Shvut, for a few days. Hodaya is struggling with her own religious identity, and discovers that her niece is as well. Literally from the moment she steps off the bus, and sheds her skirt to reveal that she is wearing jeans, it is very clear that her niece is acting out, and wishes to repudiate the "goody two shoes" from Gush Katif that she once was. When Hodaya confronts Shvut about her rebellious behavior, Shvut finally confesses. She had serious issues with God, following the Disengagement. "We all sat together in shul and prayed- we were good people! Until the last minute, I believed it would never happen. It took them seven minutes to destroy my house. I am finished with G-d." After a brief, tense pause, Hodaya replied angrily, "God is not Santa Claus...prayer is not an ATM into which you stick a card and get whatever you want in return...faith is a little more nuanced than that, and maybe there is a reason for all this suffering." Shvut is furious. "Was there some sort of pamphlet that was handed out, 'this is what you should say to the evacuated child?' You have no idea what went on there. When was the last time you prayed? But *really* prayed? Was it five years ago? Seven? In High School?" Hodaya responds, immediately: "So you don't get what you want- you cry? Many things happened that were worse than the disengagement. Catastrophes. So what, you've stopped believing? You aren't religious anymore? You are an immature, spoiled child!" Shvut disappears shortly thereafter and is out all night, but the show later reveals that she was standing by those tablets that are the repositories of countless letters; she had been praying at the Kotel. On Yom Kippur, when the letters land, we are reminded that our words to God land somewhere,

perhaps in ways we have difficulty accepting or in ways we cannot envision in our wildest dreams. At the end of Yom Kippur, that is what we will say in the Ne'ilah prayer- שתשים דמעותינו -בנאדך להיות, that you should collect our tears in your flask for preservation. Our words to God matter, and they matter especially today. But our words to other people matter just as much.

Rabbi Yitzchak Adlerstein is known to us here in Dallas through his family that lives here, and has spoken recently at Shaare; he tells a story about a remarkable experience he had in his youth. He had arranged to drive Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky zt"l from Brooklyn, after a grueling series of speaking engagements, to his home in Monsey. A friend had persuaded him to allow him to tag along, and both of them had prepared lists of questions that they hoped to ask him in the course of the drive. As Rabbi Adlerstein put it, "We both prayed for heavy traffic." Because this was such a special opportunity, they took a tape recorder along (kids- if you don't know what a tape recorder is, ask your parents), but they didn't have the chutzpah to ask permission, so they concealed the machine. Now, recording a conversation unbeknownst to its participants may technically be legal, but it is ethically dubious, to say the least. Things went well for about 45 minutes and then, in the middle of a pause in conversation, they heard a "click" sound. They were mortified...their ethical breach had been revealed in the most humiliating way possible. But Rav Yaakov had nothing but smiles for his young chauffeurs. "Oh! So you are recording our conversation? That's quite all right." And then he said something that Rabbi Adlerstein would never forget. Paraphrasing a statement of Rav Yosi in Tractate Arachin, Rav Yaakov said, "Never in my life have I said anything and had to take it back later."

Our words are powerful, but we often don't realize it. So often, we engage in idle chatter, meaningless nothings that don't further any kind of relationship and are just so much background

noise. In an op ed piece on the New York Times in January of this year, Tim Boomer gave voice to a new movement called “End Small Talk.:

Why can't we replace small talk with big talk and ask each other profound questions right from the start? Replace mindless chatter about commuting times with a conversation about our weightiest beliefs and most potent fears? Questions that reveal who we are and where we want to go?¹

When we feel our words lack substance, are devoid of lasting power and make no impression, it doesn't just lead to empty conversation- it leads to far worse, as we say hurtful things to or yell at our loved ones, speak in ways that are less than refined, make promises we never intend to keep or misrepresent our feelings, emotions and thoughts in order to pacify or impress others. The truth is that, whether we realize it or not, there is no such thing as small talk- every word we say, every “Letter,” may land in a way that can impact people in profound ways. My good friend Rabbi Don Pacht, the headmaster of the Vancouver Hebrew Academy, was once shopping at Safeway and encountered a woman from the community. She asked how his family was doing and he replied, in the way you would exchange pleasantries in the produce aisle. When he asked her how she was doing, things took a turn when because she actually told him; she revealed that she and her husband had separated. Rabbi Pacht began searching his mental database frantically for something to say that was sufficiently sympathetic, but entirely innocuous. Quickly, he was able to pull out this gem: “The most important thing is to keep open the lines of communication.” Of course, it's hard to forget that kind of interaction and the news stuck with him, but he forgot completely what he had told her in response. Some months later, they met again and she thanked

¹ http://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/17/fashion/dating-the-end-of-small-talk.html?_r=0

him profusely for his advice. It was that phrase, that meaningless platitude, that she credited with her and her husband's reconciliation.

[Yizkor: Our Judaism, our prayers, our words- they aren't just "floating"- and the same is true with our loved ones who have passed.. Whether the loss is recent or of a vintage, their "letters"- the lessons they taught, the values they modeled, the hopes and aspirations they carried- those find a resting place and remain alive within us. Yom Kippur reminds us to live up to their examples and continue their legacies. But beyond that...] This Yom Kippur, we are the tablets, and the letters come home to rest. Let us resolve to live our lives with purpose and joy, so that the Judaism we carry is no burden. Let us continue praying, so that our words will continue to land. And let us remember that our words don't fly in the air; we have the ability to effect lasting, positive change through even the simplest remark. And may God inscribe our letters permanently in the greatest book- the book of life.