

**THE 10 DAYS OF
REPENTANCE:**
A Display of G-d's
Overwhelming Attribute
OF MERCY

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The 10 Days of Repentance:

A Display of G-d's Overwhelming Attribute of **Mercy**

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Weekly Torah Commentary Series: Vayeilech



**THE 10 DAYS OF
REPENTANCE:**
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Seek Him Out When He Is Close

Gemara in Tractate Rosh Hashanah: There are two verses which seem to be contradictory, “Moshe said to the Jewish people – who is as great as our G-d? Whenever we call out to Him, (He responds).” However, the Prophet Yeshaya said to the Jewish people, “You should seek out G-d when He is found. Call to Him when He is close.”

Yeshaya the Prophet is saying that G-d will only respond to one’s prayers when He is available and close. He is not continuously available and receptive to one’s prayers. Moshe, on the other hand, said that it is whenever the Jew calls out to G-d, He will respond. How do we reconcile the words of Yeshaya and the words of Moshe?

Gemara: The verse stated by Moshe is referring to the prayers of a community “tzibur.” Whenever a quorum

(a minimum of ten men) beseeches G-d, He responds to them whenever they call out to Him. However, regarding an individual, because he does not have the merit of the community, G-d only responds during the time when He is found and close, which is the Ten Days of Repentance between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Thus, the Prophet Yeshaya is referring to the supplication of the individual during the Ten Days of Repentance, while the Moshe is referring to supplication of the community throughout the year.

Rambam in the Laws of Repentance: “Although repentance and supplicating G-d is valuable and beneficial throughout the year, during the ten day period from Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur it is especially beneficial. During this special time, one’s repentance and supplications are accepted immediately by G-d. As the Prophet Yeshaya said to the Jewish people, ‘You should seek out G-d when He is found. Call to Him when He is close.’ However,

whenever the community calls out with a full heart (leiv shaleim) throughout the year, G-d will respond to them.”

It seems from the Gemara that during the Ten Days of Repentance capacity as the prayers of the community during the entire year. However, Rambam has a slightly different understanding. He interjects the words “full heart” regarding the prayers of the community, which was not written in the Gemara. Based on the words of Rambam, one may infer that during the Ten Days of Repentance, even if the individual does not call out to G-d with a “full heart” G-d will respond. Whereas the community needs too call out to Him with a “full heart” throughout the year in order to be heard. Since G-d has a special intimate relationship with the Jew during the Ten Days of Repentance, although the individual’s prayers may be deficient because he is not supplicating Him with a “full heart”; nevertheless, the individual’s prayers are embraced by G-d. It is only because of the distance that exists throughout the year between the Jewish people and G-d that they must pray with a “full heart” for Him to respond.

This can be understood with an allegory. There once was a great king who had banished his son from the kingdom to be exiled to a farm community. After many years had passed, the king began to long for his son. The king traveled to the outlying village where his son was located. When the king arrived and inquired about the whereabouts of his son, he was told by the foreman that he is out in the field picking corn. The king in his regal garments approached his son whose skin had become worn from years of working in the fields. He tapped his son on the shoulder and asked him, “Do you know who I am?” The son answered, “Yes, you are the king, my father.” The king said, “I would like to offer you one request. Whatever that one request may be, I will fulfill it. However, you must think carefully as to what you would like because I will not grant you another request.”

The son pondered for a while and then said to his father, “I would like a new pair of leather work boots.” The king was devastated by his son’s response. He had hoped that his son would have asked him to return home to the palace where he would be given everything. However, because of the distance and limitation of the son, he only asked his father for a pair of boots, which have no intrinsic value whatsoever.

During the Ten Days of Repentance, G-d wants the Jew to return to Him more than anything else because of his special love for the Jewish people who He values as His most beloved child. Therefore, during this special time when G-d is available and close, one must reflect and introspect carefully in order to supplicate G-d for things that are truly meaningful and of great importance. G-d’s desire for the Jew to return during this time to such a degree that he does not even need to pray with a “full heart” for G-d to embrace him. One must only demonstrate an interest in returning to Him through repentance and a commitment to the future. One may take the opportunity to ask G-d for assistance to advance spiritually, which is a request that has eternal value. G-d will provide any material that is needed to facilitate that request and much more.

Activating One’s Spirituality

Torah: During the first day of Chol HaMoed Succos on the eighth year of the Sabbatical cycle, the entire Jewish People; men, women, and children, gather on the Temple Mount to hear the reading of the Book of Devarim (Mishna Torah) by the King of Israel. This Positive Commandment is referred to as Hakheil.

Torah: The purpose of this reading is, “So that they (the Jewish people) should listen and learn to fear Hashem, your G-d and be careful to perform all the words of this Torah.” The objective of the mitzvah of Hakheil is to instill the fear of G-d into the hearts of the Jewish people. As a result of this reverence, they will observe the dictates of the Torah as prescribed.

Torah regarding the Sabbatical year: The Land of Israel must remain fallow and one is not permitted to engage in agricultural pursuits. The Sabbatical year is referred to by the Torah as, “Shabbos L’ashem (A Sabbath for G-d).”

Sforno in his commentary: “Shabbos L’ashem” is a year that should be dedicated to Torah study, introspection, and meditation. The Sabbatical year should be devoted completely to spiritual pursuits and growth. It is after this year that the Jewish people gather on the Temple Mount in order to hear the King of Israel read Mishna Torah to learn to revere G-d and keep His Torah.

According to the understanding of “Shabbos L’ashem”, that the Sabbatical year is a time that is designated for spiritual pursuit, it would seem that the mitzvah of Hakheil should precede the Sabbatical year rather than follow it. If the purpose of the reading of Mishna Torah on the Temple Mount was to inspire the people to fear G-d to keep His Torah, it would seem that prior to the Sabbatical Year one should first gather on the Temple Mount to hear the Book of Devarim to be inspired and motivated. As a result of this inspiration, the following year would be fully dedicated to spiritual growth.

However, the Torah states that this is not the sequential order. For one to have the capacity to internalize and be a beneficiary of a spiritual endeavor, one must first activate and hone his spiritual senses. In order to bring this about, one must dedicate a full year immersed in Torah study and meditation to reflect on one’s spirituality. This should be done without any distraction. Thus, the Sabbatical year is a year truly dedicated for G-d (Shabbos L’ashem).

After dedicating a year in within the context of spiritual immersion, one experiences Rosh Hashanah (the Day of Judgment), the Ten Days of Repentance, culminating with Yom Kippur, during which one repents and is thus spiritually purified before G-d. As it states, “Before G-d you shall purify yourselves.” It is only after all of this spiritual preparation that one has the capacity to be a full beneficiary of the Hakheil event. Without this level of preparation and orientation, although one may be able to intellectually appreciate, and even be inspired, from what he is hearing, he will not be able to fully internalize the experience so that it should have an everlasting effect.

If one enters into Rosh Hashanah without sufficient preparation, regardless of the awesomeness of the day or the setting in which he is praying, he will not be affected in a meaningful and lasting manner.

Mishna: On Rosh Hashanah the Jewish people pass before G-d as “benei morone.” There is an argument in the Gemara as to the meaning of “benei morone.” One opinion is it is similar to a particular mountain pass. The only way to ascend the mountain was to walk in a single file along the steps that go up the mountain. On either side of the steps there was a deep valley.

Reb Yitzchak Peterburger: If one knows that he will be ascending a narrow path that can only be climbed single file, he will do everything he can to be there as early as possible to make the ascent because the one who arrives first will be able to make the ascent sooner. Similarly, before Rosh Hashanah, the Jew must prepare himself for the day of Judgment on many levels. It should be through introspection, repentance, and reflection upon one’s spirituality. This is to give one the ability to transcend his physical constraints. The sooner this focus is put into place, it is advantageous to the individual because G-d will value him to a greater degree and allow him to come before Him sooner in judgment.

It is cited by many of the commentators that the name of the month of “Elul” is an acronym for “Ani L’Dodi V’Dodi Li - I am to my beloved as my beloved is to me.” The acronym begins with “I am to my beloved” indicating that one needs to take the initiative and only then “my beloved (G-d)” will come close.

Gemara in Tractate Shabbos: “One who attempts to purify himself will be assisted.”

Gemara in Tractate Kiddushin: Without Divine Assistance it is not possible for one to repent. The evil inclination lurks to kill the individual. One must strive to develop a sensitivity to spirituality in order to merit G-d’s Assistance. Therefore, it is only after one has immersed himself for one year in Torah study and introspection and experienced Rosh Hashanah, the Ten Days of Repentance, and Yom Kippur will he have the capacity to be able to internalize the reading of the Torah by the King of Israel.

The Catalyst for Sanctity

Amidah (Silent Prayer) of the three Festivals, Rosh Hashanah, and Yom Kippur: “You have chosen us from all the peoples; You loved us and found favor in us; You exalted us above all the tongues and You sanctified us with Your commandments. You drew us close, our King....”

G-d chose the Jewish people from among the nations of the world to be His at Sinai. It was at the Sinai event that the Jewish people received the Torah and its mitzvos. Through the performance of these mitzvos,

the Jewish people become sanctified. As we see from the text of the blessing upon which every mitzvah is predicated, "Blessed are you Hashem...Who has sanctified us with His commandments..." Only after they have become sanctified through the mitzvos can they be drawn close to Him.

We supplicate G-d in the Amidah every Shabbos and Yom Tov, "Sanctify us with Your mitzvos and give us our portion in Your Torah." The two statements of the Amidah of the Festivals seem to be contradictory. We first say that G-d sanctified us, referring to the Sinai event. We then beseech G-d that He should allow the mitzvos that we perform to sanctify us. In addition, the text of the blessing indicates that the natural consequence of the performance of a mitzvah is sanctification. If this is so, why must we supplicate G-d for sanctification?

Rambam in the Laws of Repentance: "How great is the special value of repentance! Only yesterday one was separated from Hashem, the G-d of Israel. As the verse states, 'Your sins cause a separation between you and your G-d...' One cries out to G-d, yet He does not respond. One performs mitzvos and G-d throws them back at him. As it states, 'You are trespassing My courtyard! Who desires this from you?...'"

"However, after one repents one becomes attached to the Divine Presence. As it states, 'You will cleave to Hashem, your G-d...' When one supplicates G-d his requests are answered immediately....When one performs the mitzvos (after repentance) G-d receives them with joy." The Jew has the capacity to be sanctified through the performance of mitzvos because it is a result of being taken as G-d's people at Sinai. Thus, when the Jew performs the mitzvah it brings about sanctification. On the other hand, if a non-Jew would perform the same mitzvah, it would bring about no result. He would remain unaffected.

Sanctification emanates from one's connection to G-d. The mitzvah is the catalyst which allows the Jew to cleave to G-d and thus brings about sanctification. This is because G-d is the source of all sanctity and holiness. However, if one sins and is in need of repentance, because of the distance between the individual and the Creator, G-d rejects the mitzvah. The sinner has no basis to become rooted in G-d.

Therefore there is no sanctity that results from the performance of the mitzvah.

However, after one repents, which causes an intimacy between the individual and G-d, the mitzvah once again can become the catalyst between the individual and G-d. As stated by Rambam, G-d then accepts the mitzvah with joy. Because Shabbos and Yom Tov are days of mercy, we supplicate G-d that although we are not fully worthy of a relationship with Him, our mitzvos, despite the fact that they are lacking should bring about the intended result, which is sanctification. This is the basis of the supplication, "Sanctify us through the performance of Your mitzvos." This will allow the Jew to receive his portion in the Torah. The Ten Days of Repentance, especially Yom Kippur, which is the ultimate day of Mercy, allows the Jew to achieve a special level of worthiness, although throughout the year he may have been unworthy.

The Significance of the Repentance Process

Rambam in the Laws of Repentance: "Yom Kippur is the day of repentance that applies to all, whether it is the individual or the community. It is the end of the time of repentance and forgiveness for the Jewish people.... On Yom Kippur, one is obligated to repent and make a verbal confession." Although one may choose to repent throughout the year, it is not an obligation. However, on Yom Kippur one is obligated to repent because it is the moment to do so because G-d metes out His final judgment.

Rambam: "The mitzvah of (verbal) confession begins before Yom Kippur before one partakes of the meal prior to the fast, because there is a concern that one may accidentally choke during the meal (and will die without confessing)." It is interesting to note that although the obligation of repentance begins only on Yom Kippur, we see that one is able to fulfill this obligation before the eating of the meal which is prior to the fast. If in fact it is the day has not yet begun, how does one fulfill his obligation of confession?

Regarding the kindling the lights of Chanukah, it is ruled in Jewish law states that if one kindles the menorah prior to nightfall, which is prior to one's obligation, one nevertheless fulfills his obligation.

Thus, we see that if one performs a mitzvah pertaining to a holiday before the time of the holiday it is still considered as if one fulfilled his obligation on the holiday itself. This is because the time prior to the holiday identifies and is connected to the holiday itself. Regarding Yom Kippur, since there is concern that one may choke during the meal in preparation for the holiday, one may fulfill his obligation of repentance through verbal confession before the onset of Yom Kippur. If no mishap had taken place during the meal, although one had already made his verbal confession; nevertheless, it is repeated on Yom Kippur, which is the time of repentance.

Rambam: "...Although in previous years one had confessed for sins of the past, he must once again confess for this sins again. This is repeated every subsequent Yom Kippur. This is true even if one is steadfast in his repentance. As it states in Psalms, 'My sin are before me continuously...' If King David had repented and confessed for his sin, why would it remain before him continuously? It is from this that we learn that one must continuously repent for the sins of the past, although he had not regressed. Why is this so?

In order for one to be fully forgiven and atoned for one's sins, one must make a sincere commitment to the future to never again repeat the sin. In addition, when one repents one must have the deepest sense of remorse for having transgressed the Word of G-d. It should be to the point of agony. When one repents one does not know whether his repentance had fully atoned and rehabilitated him to a point that there is no trace of that sin.

However, if one repeats the repentance process every Yom Kippur then he will be removing layers of impurity until he is able to achieve complete rehabilitation. Rabbeinu Yonah writes in the Gates of Repentance that when one sins for the first time in a particular area, his degree of culpability is not as great as one who sins a second time in the same area. This is because initially one was not aware of his vulnerability in that area and thus came upon sin without realizing his degree of susceptibility. However, once one sins and realizes that he has a vulnerability in this area, he must take the proper precautions so as not to repeat his sin again.

Consequently, the repeated offender has greater culpability because he was not sufficiently responsible

regarding his personal areas of weakness. With this we can understand the words of King David. His sin was before him continuously, despite the fact that he was fully atoned for his past transgression, because he was always cognizant of that sin. This was for the sole purpose to maintain a sensitivity and understanding to his vulnerability in this area so that it should not be repeated again.

One's Spiritual Reinstatement Through Repentance

Rambam in the Laws of Repentance: In order for one to repent properly one must have remorse for having transgressed and must make a sincere commitment not to repeat the sin in the future. In order to assure that one's commitment remains in place one must make a decision to divorce himself from the sin completely.

Gemara in Tractate Taanis: "One who repents and does not abandon the sin it is similar to one who immerses himself in a mikvah (ritual bath) while still holding on to the rodent (which is the source of contamination)."

Similarly, if one is not committed to terminate his relationship with the particular sin, he will not be atoned because he continues to have relevance to the source of the problem. However, if one repents sincerely and properly, he will be atoned and rehabilitated to a spiritual state of purity that existed prior to his sin. If in fact the individual transgressed the Word of G-d, how does repentance undo the act which was the source of transgression?

In order for one to be culpable for his action, one must have some degree of intent when performing that act. If one is compelled to transgress, there is no culpability to the individual. The action is not attributed to the one who executed it. This is based on the principle, "ownes Rachmana patrei (the Torah absolves one in a situation where he was forced to sin)."

The process of teshuvah (repentance) is a mechanism that nullifies and removes one's intent from the action. When feeling a deep sense of remorse and committing never to sin again in the future, it will nullify the original intent of the sin, although the action remains in place.

Gemara in Tractate Berachos: “At the level where the repentant (baalei teshuvah) stand, even the devoutly righteous (tzaddik) do not stand.” Meaning, that a repentant who achieves the same level of righteousness as a tzaddik who was always righteous, has a greater level of reward than the tzaddik. The tzaddik, who has always been righteous and devout, does not need to contend with a deviant past. He is conditioned from the very beginning of his life to do what is proper and correct as prescribed by G-d. In contrast, the repentant, although he is fully committed to severing himself from sin, he must contend with a continuous struggle with his past life of sin. Thus when he succeeds in subordinating his evil inclination, his degree of reward will be greater than that of the tzaddik.

This is based on the principle stated in the Mishna in Ethics of Our Fathers, “According to one’s struggle/anguish is his reward.” If one offends or betrays his fellow, despite the fact that he has been forgiven by the one who he had victimized, the original relationship

will never be fully reinstated. The feeling of trust and friendship will never be the same. However, this is not so regarding one’s transgressing against G-d. One of the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy of G-d is, “He will return and have Mercy upon you...”

Ramak in his work Tomer Dvora: Despite the level of one’s sin, if one repents sincerely and brings about the necessary changes, G-d’s love for him will be even more intense than it had been before the sin.

This is because G-d understands the degree of struggle and effort that the individual must endure in order to repent and maintain this state. Yom Kippur, which is the day when one has the obligation to repent and is the greatest day of mercy, if one takes the initiative and utilizes the day responsibly, he will not only be reinstated, G-d’s love for him will be even more intense.



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