

Good morning all. It's so wonderful to see everyone in our virtual bubble. I hope you have had a meaningful day so far, and if you are fasting, that you feel lofty and angelic, as we are meant to, free from some of our day-to-day desires. (It's only about noon, so from personal experience, this lofty feeling is still available for another few hours. From about 3:00pm onward, just hang in there.)

We have just read the Yom Kippur rituals in the Torah, delineated in Parsha Acharei Mot, which illustrate how Israel as a nation will atone for its iniquities and transgressions. The parsha's title means "After Death," referring to the death of Aaron's sons.¹ The reasons for their death, as well as the repercussions of this event are a deep and lengthy topic. But widely accepted, and appropriate for our purposes, is the school of thought that Nadab and Abihu did not die out of punishment, but rather the incense that they brought before G-d was not done properly, to the point that it consumed them. As in, the spiritual experience was too lofty for them to experience as human beings. I will return to this a little later.

Notably, among the rituals in our Torah reading today, there is an incense offering, which it is said alone represents the sin of lashone hara (derogatory speech which may or may not be true.) Then we have the goat offerings, which detail how the distinct sacrifice of two separate goats will complete the atonement process for Israel.

The great question is always, "How do we put this in a context that is relevant to us?"

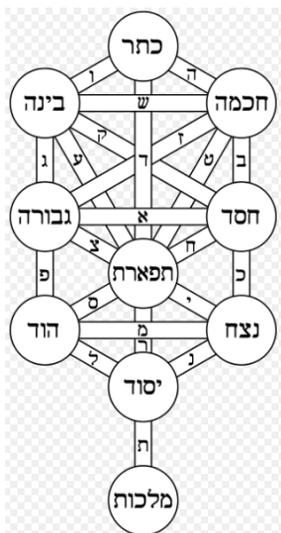
In the Torah, there is a distinction between חוקים "chukim" and משפטים "mishpatim." The former are esoteric laws which are suprarational; the latter have a more understandable explanation, or simply make sense within the scope of a human moral code. The Yom Kippur parasha is full of "chukim." So one direction to take when speaking about this parasha can be the "you're not meant to understand the finer details" approach. Another type of discussion might go in the opposite direction and delineate why and how each of these chukim are ordained by G-d. I, humbly, will decline from going in either of these directions at this time, but they are cannonized into Jewish thought and Rabbi Google can direct you to thousands of discussions on "chukim." I would rather like to focus on the more approachable, yet also deeply Kabbalistic concept of tshuva, which is also the goal of our Yom Kippur rituals.

Yom Kippur is about Tshuva, or "returning." But to what? To ourselves. So this makes the assumption that our true souls are perfect--a comforting thought in place of the "original sin" concept that pervades society.

Following Chassidic thought, *"Teshuvah is a soul's experience of the agony of disconnection from its source and its channeling of this agony to drive its return to G-d. Thus, our sages have said that the sins of a baal teshuvah (all of us) (returnee) are "transformed into merits," and that he attains a level of relationship with G-d on which "even the perfectly righteous cannot stand." His transgressions become virtues, for the distance and disconnection they created have become the impetus for greater closeness and deeper connection. His sins have provoked — and his teshuvah has actualized — a dimension of his soul's connection to G-d which a perfectly righteous life never touches."*²

But what leads us "away," since "return" is the goal? In the school of thought that we all have a צר' הטוב "yetzer hatov," good inclination and a צר' הרע "yetzer hara," a wicked one, it can be easy to fall into the original sin trap. A deeper understanding of those inclinations says that negative things happen when they are out of balance. Qualities that are associated with the yetzer hara tend to include physical indulgences, which lead to greed, while qualities associated with the yetzer hatov include qualities of refinement and careful judgement. Neither of these qualities have a value judgement on their own, but physical indulgence without restraint and restraint with no indulgence have negative consequences. The Kabbalistic structure of the universe acknowledges this. Each emanation has its complementary and polar part.

(See diagram)



[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tree_of_life_\(Kabbalah\)#/media/File:Tree_of_life_bahir_Hebrew.svg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tree_of_life_(Kabbalah)#/media/File:Tree_of_life_bahir_Hebrew.svg)

Chochmah and Binah (Wisdom and understanding)

Gevurah and Chesed (Discipline and kindness)

Hod and Netzach (Splendor and Victory)

So Yom Kippur, is about returning to a divine balance. Our Teshuva is to reflect upon why our inclinations were out of balance, leading us to transgress in various ways, and how to come back to balance.

Our sages say that actually all words in the Torah are about avoiding the yetzer hara. This certainly puts many difficult parts of the text in a more digestible light. When a Torah portion includes violence, difficult relationships, and death, if we come back to the context that what is written is for the purpose of avoiding the yetzer hara, there is perhaps some comfort to be had. For example, when there are passages about how people should behave during war, those passages at first appear archaic and dated. However, if we think about the culture of the times, and what must go through people's minds during war, the rules make more sense. If you must go to war and you're in this awful position, here is how to start to come out of it in a way that is realistic in context.

I cannot say exactly how the burning of incense or the sacrifice of goats lead us away from the yetzer hara and towards the yetzer hatov, or perhaps a balance of the two. But, *“Chassidic teaching explains that the animal sacrifices offered in the Holy Temple represent the person’s offering of his own animal soul to G-d—the subjugation of one’s natural instincts and desires to the divine will. This is the deeper significance of the foul odor emitted by the sacrifices, which the ketoret came to dispel: the animal soul of man—which is the basic drive, common to every living creature, for self-preservation and self-enhancement—possesses many positive traits which can be directed toward gainful and holy ends; but it is also the source of many negative and destructive traits. When a person brings his animal self to the Temple of G-d and offers what is best and finest in it upon the altar, there is still the foul odor—the selfishness, the brutality and the materiality of the animal in man—that accompanies the process. Hence the burning of the ketoret, which possessed the unique capability to sublimate the evil odor of the animal soul within its heavenly fragrance.”*³

As we attempt to balance our inclinations this year, we can ask ourselves questions as we go about our day.

*“When engaging in any physical activity – eating, sleeping, talking – stop for a moment and ask yourself: Why am I doing this? What’s the goal? Am I using it to dull reality, or will it energize me to accomplish higher things? Will it bring me closer to God, or further away?”*⁴

I would extrapolate, based on the name of the parasha we’re reading, Acharei Mot, again which means "after death," that this “closeness” to G-d is balanced with fully accepting our humanness. Nadab and Abihu were out of balance in reaching for G-d, but not accepting, or coming back to their humanness.

We currently reach for closeness with G-d today on Yom Kippur, by fasting, becoming angelic, free from human physical indulgences. But we will return, later on this evening, to eating, to humanness. Our physical desires, hunger and thirst, in their function to keep us alive, will bring us back.

It will be our charge this year, to appreciate how our physical desires serve us as human beings, and how we are gifted with consciousness, to put them in divine balance.

L’Shana Tova Umetuka and Gemar Chatima Tova

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Sources:

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