

Acharei Mos

Ki Bayom Hazeh Y’chaper (#1)

A synopsis of the Maamar found in Likutei Torah

REGARDING YOM KIPPUR, the Day of Atonement, we are told (Leviticus 16:30), "For on this day He will atone for you, to purify you of all your sins; before G-d you will be purified." The expression "He will atone for you" sounds like a reference to some prior verse in which, presumably, the one who will atone is identified. Yet this is not so; although it is clear from the context that the reference is to G-d, this is nowhere made explicit. Why, then, did the Torah not simply say, "For on this day, G-d will atone for you"? Why the oblique reference to G-d simply as "He"? The significance of the answer will be better appreciated after the following discussion:

Yom Kippur is the day when repentance is most efficacious. The Hebrew word for "repentance" -- t'shuva -- literally means "return," the idea being that one should strive to elevate one's soul and return it to the pristine state of holy purity and union with G-d in which it existed before being born into this material world. This union is expressed by the Zohar's comment (missing from today's extant texts but quoted in numerous later sources) on the verse describing G-d's creation of Adam (Genesis 2:7), "and He blew into his nostrils the breath of life." The Hebrew word for "breath" in this verse also means

"soul," and the Zohar seeks to explain the seemingly strange image of G-d "blowing" the soul into man. The Zohar states, "One who blows, blows from within himself," i.e., from deep within the person -- as distinct from the relatively superficial level of breath that is expended by merely speaking. Just blow strenuously a few times and you will agree that something of one's inner vitality is expended thereby. After telling us that G-d created the world with ten sayings ("Let there be light, etc."), the Torah relates that when it came time to give man a soul, this was not accomplished by just another spoken command, but by "blowing" -- because our soul is of the inner essence of G-d, as it were.

The above underscores what an unimaginable descent it is for the soul to leave its sublime and lofty source and plunge into the darkest depths of this physical world. One wonders what could possibly justify such a descent; why, in other words, was it G-d's will that the soul descend at all, especially since t'shuva -- elevation and return of the soul to its original state -- is extremely difficult and not always successfully accomplished?

To understand this, we must first understand the symbolism of the verse (Deuteronomy 4:24), "For G-d, your G-d, is a consuming fire." It is the natural tendency of fire to soar upwards. When one looks at a flame, one can easily imagine it leaping and springing in its struggle to break free of its moorings -- the wick or logs which hold onto it, as it were -- and ascend heavenward. Similarly, it is written of G-d's word (Jeremiah 23:29), "Is not My word as fire?" The symbolism of this is that the "words" by which G-d created heaven and earth (the "ten utterances" referred to above, i.e., "Let there be light"; "let there be a firmament," etc.) -- and, more to the point, the spiritual creative energy with which G-d imbued them -- is like a fire in that the tendency of this G-dly energy is to return to its heavenly source rather than remain invested within creation as its animating force.

Nevertheless, it does remain within creation, constantly revitalizing and renewing its existence, as it is written (Psalms 119:89), "Forever, O G-d, Your word stands fast in the heavens." In fact, just as a fire cannot truly be called by that name unless it grasps onto and is held by some fuel, e.g., wick or logs -- that is, there can be no disembodied, "floating" fire -- the "word of G-d" is an expression that can only be said to apply when that "word" is invested within the created universe: G-d on His own, so to speak, certainly needs no "spoken words." Now, when G-d first created the universe, this was an act of pure kindness on His part; there was nothing which man did (not yet having been created) to have deserved it. However, now that we do exist, it is incumbent upon us mortals to elicit the benevolence on the part of G-d shown by His constant renewal of creation.

This is accomplished through Torah and its 613 mitzvos (which can be categorized as 248 positive commandments like "put on t'fillin" and 365 negative injunctions like "do not steal"). These serve as the "wicks" and "logs" which hold the "fire" of G-d's word within this world.

This is so because the 248 positive and 365 negative mitzvos parallel the 248 limbs and 365 organs which the Torah identifies within a person. One's limbs serve as vehicles for the expression of one's will (e.g., the arm automatically extends as soon as the person wishes to perform some task), and may be said to be "garments" in which that will is "enclothed." Similarly, the mitzvos of the Torah express G-d's will within creation and are allegorically called its "garments" for that reason. This is all alluded to by the verse (Isaiah 43:7), "All that is called by My name and for My honor I created it, I formed it, even did I make it." "Honor" (kavod in Hebrew) is associated with garments, as the Talmud relates (Shabbos 113a), "Rabbi Yochanan called his garment [his] 'honor'." Thus, the statement that everything in the universe was created for the honor of G-d contains the

implication that it is only by action of the "garments" of G-d -- His will as expressed through mitzvah performance -- that the universe is created.

Torah study as well, in addition to performance of its mitzvos, is called G-d's "honor," since it is His wisdom and will. In fact, the Hebrew word for honor, kavod, is numerically equivalent, by the grammatical principle of gematria, to 32 -- the mystical "32 pathways of wisdom" by which the Torah proceeds from its "natural" state as G-d's incomprehensible wisdom to the point at which we mortals can understand its application to everyday life.

Now, we have just finished explaining that the Torah and its mitzvos are the "wicks and twigs" which hold the "fire" of G-d's creative word in this world. More specifically, the Torah and mitzvos can be grouped into the three broad categories of Torah, prayer and charity, corresponding to the three categories in the Mishnaic teaching (^^^), "the world stands upon three things: on Torah, on worship (avodah) and on acts of kindness." Furthermore, these three things can be identified with the three expressions of creation in the verse quoted above: "I created it (b'rasiv), I formed it (y'tzartiv) ... I made it (asisiv)" -- which in turn correspond to thought, speech and action.

Prayer requires concentration: one must pay attention (kavanah) to what one is saying and have the requisite intent in one's mind and heart. It is true that one must pronounce the words aloud, but this is primarily to arouse one's intent. In Hebrew, the word for "created" (bara) connotes coming into being out of nothing. Likewise, thoughts spring into a person's mind as from nowhere. This is why prayer, which is primarily a function of kavana -- thought and heartfelt intent -- corresponds to the expression "I created it."

In particular, what one should strive to concentrate on during prayer, and to develop in one's heart, is a true recognition that G-d is One with an all-encompassing unity, and that the worshipper, too, is a part of that. One should try to arouse within oneself the sincere feeling that only G-d matters, and that one is totally subservient to Him; one has no will other than to attach oneself to G-d and be utterly devoted to His will.

The form of our morning blessings is structured around the above theme and the idea that, as mentioned above, this manner of worship helps draw G-d's life-giving force down into this world. The formula, "Blessed are You, G-d our G-d, King of the universe..." may be parsed as follows: "Blessed" in Hebrew (baruch) connotes drawing forth. The first Divine name in the blessing (the Tetragrammaton, the ineffable four-letter name of G-d) symbolizes G-d as he transcends creation, G-d's very "self," as it were; the second Divine name (Elokeinu, our G-d) is associated with G-d's presence within creation. The idea is, we are beseeching G-d that the spiritual level represented by the first name -- the transcendent, personal level of G-dliness -- be drawn down and so thoroughly imbued within us that G-d can be called by the second expression -- our (own) G-d. That is, we seek to be so completely abnegated (batul) to G-d that we are the very embodiment of His will and His name can therefore be identified with us: "our G-d," just as our forefathers, who were totally batul to G-d, merited to have G-d called by their names (the G-d of Abraham, etc.). And since, as explained above, this is accomplished through Torah and mitzvos, which hold G-d's life-force within the world, it is through our achieving this that G-d is "King of the universe" -- that is, that the existence of the entire universe is constantly renewed. What is more, a king is of necessity somewhat removed from, and exalted over, the people; a person could not rightly be called "king" over his sons even if he had a great many of them. By contrast, we Jews are called

"sons" of G-d, as it is written (^^^), "You are sons of G-d your G-d."

The expression "I formed it" is associated with speech. This is because speech is not really created from nothing; rather it is an expression aloud of what had already existed in one's thoughts. One is merely "forming" and ordering the thoughts into words. Whereas thought corresponds to prayer, this level therefore corresponds to Torah, which is primarily studied aloud and taught to others, as in the verses (^^^) "and you shall teach them [the words of Torah] to your children and you shall speak in them," and (^^^) "and you shall ^^^speak of it day and night."

(Although Torah is considered spiritually superior to prayer, as our sages have taught (^^^) "and Torah study surpasses them all," there is no contradiction in identifying Torah with speech and prayer with the relatively superior level of thought. This is because, as known to mystics, the higher something is in terms of its spiritual source, the lower in this material world will it find expression.)

Finally, the expression "I made it," which corresponds to action, is associated with acts of charity, for obvious reasons.

Now, by these three ways -- prayer, Torah study and acts of charity, corresponding to thought, speech and deed -- we draw down G-dliness into the world. Nevertheless, the three are not equal in their effect. To return to the metaphor of these things as "wicks and logs" for the "fire" of G-dliness, a wick and a log are not the same either. The flame which attaches itself to a wick is small, but it is of a pure and refined quality. On the other hand, flame grasping onto logs is abundant and mighty, yet it is of a comparatively coarse quality. Similarly, the G-dly "light" that is associated with the "thought" of prayer is such that its spiritual effect is not that broad within the world, and is difficult

to perceive, yet is of a very "refined" and superior quality. The G-dly "light" of action, by contrast -- mitzva observance and Torah study, which is also "action" in the sense that (^^^) "moving his lips is [considered] action" -- is more far-reaching and its effect in animating the universe is more revealed. (Indeed, it is said that action is the main thing, as implied by the verse (^^^), "today, to do them" -- often quoted in Torah literature for the proposition that "today" (i.e., this world as opposed to the hereafter, which is called "tomorrow") is mainly a time for action, "doing.") Still, it is not of the same superior quality as "thought."

Despite the above, all are necessary and interdependent. This is comparable to the fact that in a person, one's thoughts (especially the unconscious instructions of the brain to the rest of the body) are subtle and their effect, though vital, is imperceptible; while bodily action like walking has actual and obvious effects that are perceptible to all, yet is on a relatively lower level than the activity of the brain. Clearly, however, both brain and body are necessary and interdependent, for the brain drives the legs and the legs move the brain. The verse "For G-d your G-d is a consuming fire" has another important implication. To burn successfully, a fire must have something to grasp onto which is fit to be consumed. Green logs, for example, will not burn as well (if at all) as dry tinderwood. Just as the fuel must be prepared so that the fire should be a "consuming fire," so must we make ourselves into fitting "fuel" that can indeed hold the "fire" of G-d, in order to successfully accomplish our objective in prayer, Torah study and acts of kindness.

We "prepare" ourselves by cultivating that bitul, that total nullification before G-d, referred to above. This is achieved by contemplation at prayer and by our efforts to subjugate (iskafya), and even to convert to good use (ishafcha), our impulse to give in to the temptations of this world.

That is why the elicitation and renewal of G-d's life-giving force into the world, through Torah and mitzvos, depends upon the Jews. It must be done by one who is absolutely nullified (batul) before G-d, and only the Jews have this capacity, as it says (Psalms 78:5), "For He established a Testimony [edus, a reference to mitzvos] in Jacob and appointed a Torah in Israel."

However, are not the Torah and its mitzvos encloded within a guise that we mortals can relate to? Do they not discuss everyday, worldly matters like, "eat this kind of food," or "if you have a business dispute, here is the law"? How is it possible, given that our conception of the holiness of Torah and mitzvos is limited to their wordly manifestation, for us to acheive, through them, such a pure degree of bitul to G-d and G-d alone that the very life-force of the universe is perpetuated thereby? The answer is to be found in the verse (Hosea 14:9), "I [G-d] am like a fresh cypress tree." A tall thin tree which is young and fresh can be bent over so that its top reaches to the ground; in that position, it can be made into a catapult. When released, an object placed on the bent-over top will be propelled to the highest heights. So it is with the G-dliness within the Torah and mitzvos, alluded to in the verse as "I": "I am like a fresh cypress" means that although, indeed, we are at ground level, so to speak, G-d makes His spirituality available to us anyway by encloding it in the worldly form of Torah and mitzvos. But the secret is, that the Torah and mitzvos as we know them are like that lofty treetop bent down to earth: they contain that very G-dliness which, when we study Torah and perform mitzvos, catapults us into the spiritual stratosphere. Thus, we can indeed acheive true bitul to G-d Himself.

This concept also exists with respect to evil. Just as a person catapults himself to great spiritual heights by Torah and mitzvos, transgression (G-d forbid) flings one far away from spirituality and G-dliness. This is symbolized by the verse (I Samuel 25:29), "and the souls of your enemies He will fling out as out of the hollow of a sling." Instead of the catapult propelling one toward G-d (in a manner of speaking), evildoers are cast away from Him as out of a slingshot. What a horrible thought! To be flung (G-d forbid) far, far from G-dliness! Whatever can one do to get back, to "come home again," if one is in that situation? The remedy is to "do t'shuva," to repent, to return to G-d. G-d is especially

receptive to this during the "Ten Days of Penitence," the period from Rosh Hashana to Yom Kippur. Specifically, a person should realize that G-d is inexpressibly exalted above the universe, so much so that all of creation, from the beginning of time until the end of time and including all that ever happened anywhere, is no more to G-d than a single fleeting memory. When a person truly internalizes this realization, they will be so appalled at having transgressed the will of the great G-d that they will arouse a bitter pity within themselves, pity on their own soul which their sins have flung so very far away from home. This in turn will arouse G-d's pity and compassion upon them and He will gather them in and bring them back to Him. This is hinted at in one of the additional sentences added to our Shemone Esrei prayer during the Ten Days of Penitence: "Who is like You, Compassionate Father, Who remembers His creatures for life, with mercy." By realizing how great is G-d's compassion on the insignificant and undeserving universe, in that He created it despite it being like a mere fleeting remembrance to Him, the person will themselves be aroused to compassion on his or her soul which will lead to successful t'shuva.

When the Jews committed the unspeakable sin of the Golden Calf, Moshe (Moses) was shown by G-d the way to arouse such a high level of G-d's mercy that even this would be overlooked -- for to G-d's very "Self," so to speak, nothing we mortals do can possibly matter and so forgiveness is always possible. In preparing to reveal this sublime level, the "Thirteen Attributes of Mercy," G-d told Moshe (Exodus 33:22), "I will place you in a cleft of the rock." The word used for "rock" refers to a flint stone, which has the property of producing sparks. This symbolizes the exalted level of G-d's merciful forgiveness we are discussing. In the ordinary course of spiritual affairs, "G-d your G-d is a consuming fire," which we have explained as a reference to the spirituality accessed by the Jews through Torah and mitzvos. However, one who has transgressed, G-d forbid, may be on such a low spiritual level that it is as though the "fire" of spirituality (associated with the Tetragrammaton, the first Divine name in the verse "for G-d your G-d is a consuming fire"), has gone out within them. In that case, one must arouse such compassion by their sincerest repentance as to reach that lofty level of the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy -- associated with the flintstone. Flint represents such a high level that it transcends fire: even if there is no fire in actuality, it is always present in potential within the flintstone. It just must be struck and then it ignites anew.

Not every person, however, merits to reach this exalted level. That is why we ask G-d for His assistance in doing so, as we pray (quoting

Lamentations 5:21), "Return us to You, O G-d and we will return; renew our days as of old." We ask G-d to first return us to Him -- which it is certainly within His power to do. Then we, for our part, will be able to successfully return as well. And although usually, one should first do one's part and only then expect G-d's assistance (or the spiritual benefit will not be as great), we ask G-d nevertheless to bypass this "rule" and "renew our days as of old": just as when G-d originally created the universe, He did not do so in response to our merit, but out of His own infinite goodness.

Finally, that is why G-d is referred to obliquely in the verse quoted at the beginning. "For on that day [Yom Kippur, the time of true t'shuva] He will atone for You" -- for the level being referred to is that sublime and exalted level which transcends the name of G-d, the Tetragrammaton. This level, the level of the flintstone, can therefore not be called by any name, for it is even higher than the name of G-d; higher than the "consuming fire." And that is why the verse concludes, "You will be purified before G-d" -- that is, brought to a level even higher than that associated with the name of G-d.

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