

The Yom Kippur Mikvah

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Rabbi Akiva said "fortunate are you, Israel, in front of whom do you get purified, and who purifies you? Your Father in heaven, as it is written "and I will sprinkle pure water upon you and purify you" and "God, the mikvah of Israel" – just as a mikvah purifies the impure, so too God purifies Israel."

Mishna Yoma 8:9

אמר רבי עקיבא אשריכם ישראל לפני מי אתם מיטהרין מי מטהר אתכם אביכם שבשמים שנאמר (יחזקאל ל"ו) וזרקתי עליכם מים טהורים וטהרתם ואומר (ירמיה י"ד) מקוה ישראל ה' מה מקוה מטהר את הטמאים אף הקדוש ברוך הוא מטהר את ישראל:
משנה מסכת יומא ח:ט

Rabbi Akiva, the perennial optimist of the Mishnaic era, presents us with an inspirational message. It is recorded here as the conclusion of the tractate which presents the practices of Yom Kippur. We can hear the voice of this larger than life sage encouraging us from the war-torn, post Temple era, uplifting us and reminding us that we are the beloved children of the Master of the Universe. He calls upon us to remember that Hashem, our Father in heaven, purifies us just as a mikvah purifies. This model of mikvah that Rabbi Akiva proposes is rooted in the Biblical text and is the capstone of the Mishna's presentation of the Yom Kippur experience. This imagery opens for us a world of profound learning and further inspiration. We can draw several insights from the parallels between the mikvah and our experience of Yom Kippur.

Immersion

How do we achieve the purification- that refreshing feeling of spiritual renewal that we seek each year on the holy day? It is through immersion in the sanctity of the day itself that we become pure, as the Rambam teaches:

Nowadays, when the Temple is not in existence, and we have no altar to effect atonement and we only have repentance, repentance atones for all sins. Even one who is wicked all his life and repents at the end does not get reminded of his wicked ways ... and the day of Yom Kippur itself atones for those who return, as it is written "on this day it shall atone for you."

Rambam Hil. Teshuva 1:3

בזמן הזה שאין בית המקדש קיים ואין לנו מזבח כפרה אין שם אלא תשובה, התשובה מכפרת על כל העבירות, אפילו רשע כל ימיו ועשה תשובה באחרונה אין מזכירין לו שום דבר מרשעו שנאמר רשעת הרשע לא יכשל בה ביום שובו מרשעו, ועצמו של יום הכפורים מכפר לשבים שנאמר כי ביום הזה יכפר עליכם.

רמב"ם הלכות תשובה א:ג

What does it mean that the day itself atones? Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik (1903- 1993) addressed this question in a *Teshuva Drasha*, summarized by Rabbi Hershel Schachter:

It is the Divine presence which permeates our

כתוב בפי' אחרי מות, לפני ה' תטהרו. כשהבגד

world on Yom Kippur. It itself is what cleanses us, for on this most exalted day, the Divine presence fills our world. Our encounter itself with the Divine cleanses us.² Perhaps this is the meaning of Rabbi Akiva's statement that Hashem purifies us like a Mikvah: just like the immersion in the waters of the Mikvah cleanses, so too, our immersion within the Divine presence cleanses. **Nefesh HaRav p. 25 fn 41**

מתלכלך צריכים לנקותו ע"ז כמשפשים אותו במים ובנותר להעביר את הכתמים. וכמו כן כשהאדם חוטא ונשמתו מתלכלכת, צריכים לנקותה להנשמה ע"י כן שהשכינה באה ומשפשת אותה. וזהו ענין אמירת ה' הוא הא' בסוף יום הכיפורים שהוא סימן לסילוק השכינה למעלה דרך ז' הרקיעים, כי ביוה"כ - לפני ה' תטהרו, שהטהרה באה ע"י כן שיש עמנו השראת השכינה מיוחדת, וכשנשמת האדם נפגשת בהשכינה ומשפשת בה, בזה היא מטהרת. **נפש הרב דף כה אות 41**

Intent

The basic requirement for purification that we have described above (immersion) is achieved by all on Yom Kippur. Hence, there is an opinion in the Talmud (Yoma 85b) that just being alive on Yom Kippur is sufficient to achieve atonement:

[The Mishna states] "Death and Yom Kippur provide atonement when accompanied with repentance." [This implies] that they only provide atonement together with repentance but not independently. This seems to contradict the opinion of Rabbi who states: **regarding all of the transgressions of the Torah, whether one repents or not, Yom Kippur provides atonement ...** **Yoma 85b**

מיתה ויום הכפורים מכפרין עם התשובה עם התשובה אין בפני עצמן לא נימא דלא כרבי דתניא רבי אומר **על כל עבירות שבתורה בין עשה תשובה בין לא עשה תשובה יום הכפורים מכפר ...** אפילו תימא רבי תשובה בעיא יום הכפורים יום הכפורים לא בעיא תשובה. **יומא פה:**

This is difficult to understand. What then, according to Rabbi, is the purpose of *teshuva*, which occupies our energies and focus for the entirety of Yom Kippur? Why is there a need for constant *vidui*, confession, and the gut wrenching process of examining ourselves for improvement? Here too, the model of mikvah can provide clarity. The Mishna teaches:

One who immerses for non-holy items is prohibited to eat *ma'aser*. One who immerses for *ma'aser*, is prohibited to eat *teruma* ... immersing for a holy item will allow one to eat a less-holy item, but not for a more-holy item. **Mishna Chagiga 2:6**

הטובל לחולין והחזק לחולין אסור למעשר טבל למעשר והחזק למעשר אסור לתרומה טבל לתרומה והחזק לתרומה אסור לקדש טבל לקודש והחזק לקודש אסור לחטאת טבל לחמור מותר לקל טבל ולא החזק כאילו לא טבל: **משנה מסכת חגיגה ב:ו**

Although one does achieve a basic level of purification by simply being submerged in the waters of a mikvah, nonetheless, that is not the full accomplishment. To attain higher levels of

² This is why, according to Rabbi Soloveitchik, when the chazzan recounts the words of the confession of the Kohen Gadol during the Avodah service of Mussaf on Yom Kippur, the chazzan should pause a moment between the word אָנָּה, I beg of you, and the word בְּשֵׁם, through your name, attaching the latter attaching it to the phrase which follows it regarding the atonement (see Gemara Yoma 37b and commentary). The idea is that on Yom Kippur the atonement is granted via the name of Hashem (*Machzor Mesores Harav*, Hanhagos Harav, no. 86)

purification, one must have intent. The Mishna is teaching that if one has intent to purify a vessel for a basic degree of holiness (i.e. for *terumah*) the vessel is not pure with reference to higher degrees of purity (i.e. *kodshim*). For this higher level of purity, one requires intent. The silent, internal process of reflection and resolution that is the heart of renewal and *teshuva* is the essence of the mikvah experience, as the Rambam explains:

Just as one who intends to be purified accomplishes this with immersion in the mikvah, even without any physical change, so too one who intends to purify their soul from impure thoughts and feelings is purified with immersion in pure thoughts when he decides to be rid of those thoughts.

Rambam Hilchot Mikvaot 11:12

כשם שהמכוין לבו לטהר כיון שטבל
טהור ואע"פ שלא נתחדש בגופו דבר כך
המכוין לבו לטהר נפשו מטומאות הנפשות
שהן מחשבות האון ודעות הרעות, כיון
שהסכים בלבו לפרוש מאותן העצות
והביא נפשו במי הדעת טהור
רמב"ם הלכות מקוואות יא:יב

This, explains Rabbi Yitzchak Hutner (1906- 1980) is why every day in our Tefillah we preface the section of *teshuva* (השיבנו אבינו) with the section of knowledge (אתה חונן). Attention and thoughtfulness are critical prerequisites to *teshuva*; this is the meaning of the verse which the Talmud cites about these two sections of the *Amida*:

Why was [the bracha of] teshuva established to be said after [the bracha of] wisdom [in the amida]? As it is written "And his heart will understand, and he will repent and be healed"

Megillah 17b

ומה ראו לומר תשובה אחר בינה -
דכתיב (ישעיהו ו') ולבבו יבין ושבו
ורפא לו.
מסכת מגילה דף יז.

Even Rebbi agrees that to achieve the pinnacle of spiritual renewal on Yom Kippur it is not sufficient to simply exist on Yom Kippur. One must engage in the thoughtful, introspective process of *Teshuva* to attain ultimate spiritual purity.³

Transformation

The process of *Teshuva*, spiritual renewal, is a remarkable watershed for an individual. The Rambam describes this dramatic transformation:

How wonderful is teshuva, yesterday this person was separated from God ... he cried out and was not answered ... did mitzvot and they were torn up in front of him ... and today cleaves to the Divine Presence ... cries out and is answered immediately ... does mitzvot and they are

כמה מעולה מעלת התשובה, אמש היה זה
מובדל מה' אלהי ישראל ... צועק ואינו
נענה ... ועושה מצות וטורפין אותן בפניו
... והיום הוא מודבק בשכינה ... צועק
ונענה מיד ... ועושה מצות ומקבלין אותן

³ Perhaps this can explain the Rambam's curious presentation of *Hilchos Teshuva*. After his initial first four chapters which describe the descriptions, requirements and impediments of *teshuva*, the Rambam digresses in the fifth and sixth chapter to a discussion of *בהירה* - free will. At the start of chapter seven the Rambam states, "since free will is given to all men, as we have explained, man should exert himself to do *Teshuva* ..." He continues for the duration of the chapter to discuss the achievements and descriptions of *teshuva*. We are left to wonder, why the interruption? Why the repetition of aspects of *teshuva* again in the seventh chapter? Based on our understanding that a person's attention and intention are key for ultimate *Teshuva*, free will becomes an integral part of the *teshuva* process. While one can perform the basic level of *teshuva* mechanically, one's volition enables them to achieve the highest levels of renewal. This notion is similar to an idea I once heard expressed by Rabbi Mayer Twersky regarding this Rambam.

It is astonishing to consider how a momentary process can effect such a transformation. Yet, the requirements of this process seem overwhelming, if not impossible. The Rambam enumerates four steps in the *teshuva* process: cessation of sin, regret of the sin, verbal acknowledgment of the sin and resolution not to regress. Regarding the final step, the Rambam states:

He should regret the past, as it is written "after I repented I regretted" and God shall give testimony that he will not return to his sin ever again ... and he needs to confess with his lips and to say these things that he has decided in his heart.

Rambam Hilchot Teshuva 2:2

וכן יתנחם על שעבר שנאמר כי אחרי שובי נחמתי, ויעיד עליו יודע תעלומות שלא ישוב לזה החטא לעולם שנאמר ולא נאמר עוד אלהינו למעשה ידינו וגו', וצריך להתודות בשפתיו ולומר עניינות אלו שגמר בלבו.

רמב"ם הלכות תשובה ב:ב

This requirement seems to slam the door in the face of anyone who seeks repentance. How many of us can honestly say that our resolve is so steely that we would never in fact return to the mistakes of the past? Perhaps, the model of the mikvah can again open the door to understanding. The process of purification in a mikvah is an instantaneous transformation. Before immersion, a person is distanced from Mikdash- the house of Hashem- under severe penalty, and yet, a moment later, this same individual is welcomed to the sanctuary. The Torah demands one essential step on the part of the one seeking purification: total immersion, which means one must be completely submerged in the waters of the mikvah to attain purity. We strive even further to ensure that when one is fully submerged that no barriers separate the individual from the water; certain barriers even invalidate the immersion.

We can suggest that *teshuva* follows a similar process. *Teshuva* can be accomplished in an instant, as quickly as an immersion in a mikvah.⁴ *Teshuva* can be accomplished if even if one in fact returns later to the same sin, much as purification in a mikvah is effective even if one returns to a state of impurity shortly. The key ingredient in the *teshuva* process is whether the person is fully immersed. We all know that in the future we may regress. The core issue is whether at the time of *teshuva* we are fully committed to Hashem. No one can spend their life in the waters of the mikvah maintaining absolute purity, and we cannot stand before Hashem year round wrapped in the Divine serenity of Yom Kippur. The question becomes whether in our moment before Hashem, when we do have that opportunity and responsibility of *teshuva*, we are fully connected with Hashem. If we are fully in a state of being focused and connected with Hashem, then we can say that in this state we would in fact, never return to any of our old ways again.

Creation

Our tradition teaches that the minimum size of a mikvah is a contained body of water that contains 40 *seah* (approximately 150 U.S. liquid gallons) of water. This measurement is absolute and precise; any amount less than that is not satisfactory under any circumstances.

⁴ This notion is best expressed by Rabbi in the Gemara, Avodah Zara 17a: ייש קונה עולמו בשעה אחת - one can acquire their world in one moment, when describing the transformation of Rabbi Elazar ben Durdaya.

This specific number forty seems to have special significance, as it is found elsewhere in the Torah and our tradition: forty days of downpour during the flood of Noach, a fetus is formed after forty days of gestation and the forty days of purity after the birth of a baby boy. What is the meaning of the number forty, and how is it related to the mikvah?

To appreciate this aspect of mikvah, we must begin by examining the root of this word. On the third day of creation, Hashem charged that the waters beneath the heaven gather together to enable space for dry land. He refers to these waters as מִקְוֵה מַיִם- a gathering of water, which He named seas. Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan (1934- 1983) in his classic work *Waters of Eden: the Mystery of the Mikvah*, observes that these gathered waters represent the womb of all life. Water is the essential life source of all existence and it was the first primordial substance which existed, as it says “and the spirit of Elokim was hovering over the water.” From these waters Hashem began His creation and from the gathered waters below the heavens He fashioned our world. When one immerses in a mikvah one is returning to those first days of creation, to the pristine reality that was before anything existed. When one emerges from the mikvah they are reborn, just as the world was born from water at the beginning of time. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch summarizes this concept in a lengthy discourse illuminating the concepts of purity and impurity at the close of his commentary to Parshat Shemini:

When a person immerses his entire body in such water, (viz. water that has not lost its' elemental character) and sinks completely, בְּלִי חֲצִיּוּצָה, into this element, all connections between him and the realm of impurity is severed. He leaves the ground of man, and returns for a moment to the world of elements, in order to begin a new life of purity. Symbolically, he is reborn.

We can now understand the significance of the number forty and the contexts in which it is mentioned. Each instance mentioned above is connected with the concept of rebirth. The fetus and the resulting period of purity and impurity after its birth clearly reflect this notion. The forty days of rain during the flood represent a return to the original water and chaos of creation and a subsequent rebirth of the world during the lifetime of Noach.

This leads us to the mikvah of Yom Kippur. Yom Kippur is the day of *teshuva*, which literally means return. The origins of Yom Kippur as a day of *teshuva* are found after the sin of the Golden Calf. This mistake caused a profound rift between us and Hashem and precipitated the shattering of the heavenly tablets. On the tenth of Tishrei, Yom Kippur, Moshe returned to the Jewish nation with a new set of tablets, signaling a return to our prior relationship with Hashem. This *teshuva* and its accompanying atonement was a forty day process, which began when Moshe ascended to Hashem on the first day of Elul and culminated when he returned on Yom Kippur. At the conclusion of this forty day period, we were a nation reborn, and each year we relive that renewal.

The *Tur* (*Orach Chaim* 606) records a custom of the Gaonim to immerse in a mikvah before Yom Kippur. With this practice we seek to recreate ourselves through the process of immersion in the mikvah of creation and rebirth, which parallels our process of rebirth through *teshuva*. It is our aspiration that we then fully immerse ourselves in the spirit of Yom Kippur itself and transform ourselves. In this way, we will emerge from the Yom Kippur experience with our souls and ourselves recreated for טוֹבֵיִם- a new, full life in service of Hashem.