

YOM KIPPUR -- 5757 -- September 22, 1996

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This spring I visited Ariela in Mexico. It worked out that I was there at the time of the vernal equinox, the time in the spring when day and night are equal in length; this event signals that the seasons have turned, that sunlight will dominate darkness for the next six months. Serendipitously, it is exactly today that that six month period has ended, and we are now at the time of the autumnal equinox.

Over a thousand years ago, the Mayan astronomers found a dramatic way of highlighting the vernal equinox. They built a pyramid at Chichenitza where, on the afternoon of March 21 or 22 each year, the light and shadow playing on the corners of the structure created the appearance of a huge snake slithering into the ground; for the Mayans, this symbolized the renewed fertility of the soil, and that the bounty of the land would be assured them for the coming year. [This T-shirt illustrates the event.]

Ariela and I were standing at the base of the pyramid, with another 100,000 visitors, waiting for the moment when the vision would appear. And almost everyone there was disappointed, because it did not appear in a flash, but evolved gradually, as the sun gradually made its way into the optimal position. Many people had organized their visit to Mexico around this event; the word "boring" was one of the milder responses that I heard.

However, I had closed my eyes and tried to imagine the significance of this event for the people standing beneath the pyramid a thousand years ago, waiting for the image of the snake to appear in its fullness. Although it had happened regularly in the past, it might not happen this year; perhaps this year we would not be found worthy of God's bounty? Each person waited in earnest anticipation for the assurance that this year would be one of fruitfulness, that in the coming year the gods would indeed be smiling down at them. And I imagined that at some precise moment, the high priest would emerge at the top of the pyramid and would shout out the special words which were reserved only for this occasion -- "Lifnei Adonai Tit'haru".

Of course those were not the words that he used. Those are the words that the Cohen Gadol, the High Priest, uttered on the afternoon of Yom Kippur, declaring

"before God you are cleansed", affirming that God had granted every Israelite a clean slate for the coming year, that God would bless all the work of their hands.

But standing there at Chichenitza, I had a renewed sense of the impact of the ceremony that took place each Yom Kippur, and of its significance. Standing in the courtyard of the holy Temple in the holy city of Jerusalem on this holiest day of the year, the people Israel awaited anxiously the outcome of the rituals conducted by the High Priest, waiting to hear that God had once again assured them that they had been cleansed. It was a moment in which everyone invested everything -- the success or failure of the people, both individually and communally, depended completely on the outcome of these events.

Our investment in Yom Kippur is of course limited -- we don't generally place our lives, our futures, on the line -- and so the return on our investment is also limited. And, in passing, I will note that even if we take Yom Kippur seriously as individuals, we don't really take Yom Kippur seriously as a community; even if we believe that our personal lives depend on what happens on Yom Kippur, we don't believe that our community's future is affected by our observance of this day.

Nevertheless, we are starting this evening a day-long process which may indeed be very significant for our lives; we may indeed leave Yom Kippur in a different place, we may indeed feel that God has granted us cleansing.

Cleansing from what? Most often, we seek cleansing from past misdeeds; for this, the path seems clear. Our tradition teaches that if our offenses are against God, we need only confess them before God, acknowledge our wrong-doing, promise to act differently, and accept the forgiveness provided by this day. If our offenses are against other people, we need first apologize and seek forgiveness from them as well. But once that is done, this day of Yom Kippur, what the Rabbis called "the day", Ha'yom, results in cleansing -- Lifnei Adonai Tit'haru.

Interestingly enough, the root "tahor" which means "clean" does not occur too much in the liturgy, either in the siddur or in the machzor. The phrases which we read over and over today are "Se'lach lanu, me'chal lanu, ka'per lanu" all of which connote actions which are external to ourselves. They all involve changes in the records -- grant us pardon, wipe the slate clean, accept our offering as compensation; they do not speak of changes in ourselves. God may forgive us, may grant us slichah, m'chilah, kapparah, but we still may not be cleansed.

In the Bible, the root "tahor" is the opposite of the root "ta'me" and means ritually pure; thus certain birds are considered "ta'me" and cannot be eaten, whereas others are "tahor" and are acceptable; Noah took seven of each of the "tahor" animals into the ark, but only two of the others; a person becomes "ta'me" through contact with death, but becomes "ta'hor" through contact with living waters.

Although most of the over 200 references to tahor in the Bible involve ritual purity, there is one important use of the word which clearly means something different -- the reference to Yom Kippur. For the words that the High Priest utters are those that are used in the Bible to refer to the effects of this day. "Ki bayom ha'zeh -- for on this day, atonement shall be made for you, to cleanse you -- le'taher etchem, from all your sins, before Adonai you shall be cleansed -- tit'haru." In this verse, "tahor" certainly does not refer to ritual purity, because ritual impurity passes after one or three days and after a good dunking in water; you don't need Yom Kippur for that.

So it happens that in the liturgy, the root "tahor" comes to mean spiritually pure. We all know the song "ve'taher libaynu le'avdecha be'emet", usually translated as "purify our hearts to serve you in truth". It means of course that to really serve God we must become spiritually cleansed; and it means that an important focus of our prayers should be to seek God's help to become spiritually cleansed.

Another occurrence of the root "tahor" in the liturgy is in the birchot hashachar, the early morning blessings. When we first wake up, we remind ourselves

Elohai, neshama she'natatah bi t'horah hi

my God, the soul that you gave me is tahor

atah ve'rata, atah y'tzarta, atah nefachta bi

you created it, you fashioned it into my very own soul, you breathed it into me

On the very first day of our lives, when God first breathed our soul into us, it was tahor. We say this each day to remind ourselves that this new day is also a first day, that this day too our souls can be tahor.

What happens to our souls over the course of time, what makes them "un-tahor"? What is the opposite of "cleansed"? I've never found the right word in English, "dirty" isn't right because of its moralistic overtones -- "tarnished" is better, or perhaps "encrusted", or perhaps as David Rogoff suggested, covered with "schmutz". As we live our lives, all of our negative experiences leave residues on our souls, and though our souls expand from the positive experiences that we have, the residue also grows. Indeed, please forgive this mathematical aside, even if the positive and negatives balance out, the residue expands at a greater rate than our souls.

Another metaphor. The word "tahor" is used a number of times in Exodus in discussing the construction of the mishkan. Only "za'hav tahor" -- pure gold -- may be used. In this metaphor, the opposite of "tahor" is "contaminated", perhaps a harsher description than "encrusted".

Another metaphor. All of our actions become garments for our souls. Some deeds are transformed into magical robes, whereas others cover our souls in rags. Zechariah introduces this metaphor in the vision in which an angel commands the wayward high priest Ye'ho'shu'a to cast off his filthy garments. Once that is completed, then angel says "Re'eh he'evarti me'alecha avonecha, ve'halbesh ot'cha ma'cha'la'tzot" -- See, I have removed your sins from you, and have dressed you in appropriate robes -- after which a pure diadem -- tahor -- is placed on his head. The Zohar weaves this metaphor into an image of the soul of the tsaddik wearing the beautiful robes of his/her good deeds through all eternity.

So we have a number of different ways of describing what has been happening to our souls. How do we reverse the process? Following through with the various metaphors, we can ask: How do we get rid of that "schmutz"? How do we scrape off the layers of residue that have formed? How do we purify our souls from their contamination? How can we remove those undesirable garments? How can our tarnished souls regain their sparkle? How can we let each day be our first day, a fresh start? How can we let go of all the things that prevent our souls from really serving God?

Lifnei Adonai titharu. Before Adonai, on this day, you are cleansed. The Cohen Gadol, the High Priest, announced this at the conclusion of the ceremony each Yom Kippur. And those who invested their energy into this moment left feeling

cleansed. The challenge is to let the day work its magic, to let God wash away our uncleanness.

First, of course, we have to recognize and identify the things that we are holding on to. Of course there are misdeeds, some old sins and perhaps some new sins, that we need God to take away from us; sometimes we need God to forgive us, but sometimes God has already forgiven us and we need God's assistance in forgiving ourselves.

We also need God's assistance in cleansing us of our anger and resentment, of our pain and guilt, of our fear and mistrust, and of all our behaviors that prevent our souls from expanding. Many sectors of our souls need the cleansing that God provides on this day.

So as we begin this day, I challenge you, I challenge myself, to invest spiritual energy into this day. Remember that, as Isaiah says in the haftorah, that fasting is not an end in itself, it has to lead to changes in who we are, and changes in what we do. Let your goal for today be to begin the process of allowing God to wash away the residue that tarnishes your soul. Pray with the psalmist "Lev tahor b'ra lanu, ve'ru'ach chadasha ti'ten b'kirbeinu" -- "create for us a heart that is cleansed, and a spirit that is renewed".

I'd like to conclude with a meditation on this theme.

(Meditation on permitting cleansing breaths to wash away a piece of our anger, fear, etc., concluding with the chanting of "avinu malkeynu".)