

## Yom Kippur: Covering, Cleansing, and Intimacy

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Dear Friends,

Yom Kippur is an opportunity for deep inner and outer work.

Last week I pointed out that "Rosh Hashana" has two totally opposite linguistic meanings ("repetition" and "change"). Well, so does "Yom Kippur". Just as the two different meanings of Rosh Hashana provide two opportunities for spiritual growth, so, too, do the two meanings of Yom Kippur offer two opportunities for personal reckoning.

The linguist Rubik Rosenthal explains the root of Kippur - כ.פ.ר - as "one of the oldest roots in ancient Semitic languages. In all of these languages, the meaning is the same – to forgive and pardon sins, to cleanse the past and begin again through a form of ritual ceremony. In each language, though, the meaning of the verb is subtly different. In Hebrew and in Arabic it means "**to cover**", and it is therefore also the root of the word "kaporet", which is the name of the cloth which covers the Holy Ark. The word for "ransom" - כופר - has the same root as well, and it, too, signifies a monetary covering for a sin. In Aramaic and in Acadian, however, the root כ.פ.ר implies "**cleansing**". In other words, Yom Kippur is a day in which we are cleansed of our sins... so the root means both cleansing and covering, both are synonymous with forgiveness and absolution. In the "Al Chet" prayer which we repeat many times during the Yom Kippur service, we say "Forgive us, pardon us, כ.פ.ר (k.p.r.) us."

Rosental does not really dwell on the dual meaning implied in these languages, but I find it very moving. The two meanings of כ.פ.ר - to cover and to cleanse - are very different actions! In the latter, we remove the dirt, and in the former we simply cover it over so that it is hidden from our sight.

What does this say about us? What are we being asked to do on Yom Kippur?

Yesterday I went out for coffee with two former members of the Kehillah, whom I had unintentionally offended years ago. For reasons that you will soon understand, this meeting, whose goal was to cleanse the past, happened only yesterday. Over the years in my work as a community rabbi I have unintentionally hurt many people. The nature of the position and the sensitivity involved in communal leadership involve very fragile moments, and the natural level of expectations that go with it can often lead to disappointment and pain.

A part of me – let's call it ego – felt the need to explain to them why I did what I did; that my intentions were good although the results less so. That part of me wanted to

make amends by **covering** what I had done with a "blanket" of explanations, which would hopefully make it "all better." After all, most big and small sins are usually unintended, and often have good reasons. But another part in me knew that covering and explanations were not an option, and I must ask forgiveness. After all, I hurt them, and no amount of good intentions can change that. **Explanations cover but they do not cleanse.** So I asked them sincerely to forgive me. I acknowledged that I had hurt them. I shared with them why it had happened, but I acknowledged that the reasons do not ease or change the situation.

They were very sweet, and immediately said that it wasn't so bad, that they understood... but something in me felt this wasn't enough. It really was very kind of them to let me off so easily, but I felt the exchange thus far qualified as a covering and I wanted a cleansing. To do this, I needed to take full responsibility for my actions and be very clear with myself and with them that I had, indeed, done something wrong. The accepted formula of "If I have by chance offended you unintentionally" which is often recited before Yom Kippur to our near and dear, is not enough when pain has indeed been afflicted.

Rosental adds another meaning to the root כ.פ.ר, this time from the English language. "In English Kippur means "atonement", and Webster's dictionary explains this is a 16<sup>th</sup> century combination of the words at-one-ment. In other words, atonement implies harmony; a person being one with him or herself and with God."

Bingo! This is what we REALLY want! Even though our ego wants respect, acknowledgement and to be right, deep inside what we really long for is at-one-ment - otherwise known as intimacy – with ourselves, with others and with our God. The act of covering does not move us from separation to one-ness. Cleansing does.

This is not to imply that covering our sins is not an important function. It is! It is essential to the basic social mechanisms of the human tribe. When we are unable to go through a thorough cleansing process for whatever reason – be it personal or objective – the delicate fabric of society is maintained by elaborate means of covering up the mess we leave behind in our wake. Covering does not, however, allow for honesty and intimacy. For these, cleansing is necessary in removing the barriers that our sins have erected, preventing any possibility of intimacy.

The first instance of sin and of covering in the Torah is related in the story of the Tree of Knowledge. Adam and Eve sin, and then proceed to cover up for their actions by blaming others (Adam blamed Eve, and Eve blamed the serpent). But that is not all, they physically cover themselves up with fig leaves! Furthermore, when God reprimands them and calls them to order, He, too, covers them up – this time with cloaks of skins (our Sages suggest that this is the time when God actually clothes them with their human skin, and that until then they were pure beings of

“light”). This is very significant. Both fig leaves and skin imply that Adam and Eve are no longer bare and pure (just as we are not), and they now have barriers and are no longer able to experience Divine Oneness (just as we cannot), and they feel existential shame (just as we do). This shame is covered up by social norms such as clothing, manners, titles, and cultural courtesies. These are a form of covering, which forms the basis for our existence as social and intelligent beings.

Deep within us we know that while these coverings may be appropriate for the necessary functioning of humanity, there are moments in a person's life when we want more! We are tired of covering and clothing ourselves. We want “the real thing” - we want at-one-ness. We want radical intimacy. In those moments cleansing, and not covering, is essential.

### **Avoda Shebalev - Service of the Heart:**

Each of us is invited to consider which meaning of the root כ.פ.ק, - cleansing or covering – is relevant this year. Both options are available and legitimate. Do we wish to expand our social circle? Do we want to improve our position in our professional life? In these cases, covering might be the order of the day. If we are looking for new levels of intimacy – with ourselves, with others, and/or with our God, then cleansing and getting to the root of our sins – which have formed the barrier between ourselves and others in the first place – and taking full responsibility is what is called for.

The most famous model of a Biblical figure who knew what cleansing means is Yehuda, whom we, Yehudim, are named after. Yehuda knew how to admit - hence his name, from the word "lehodot" - and to assume responsibility for two painful sins he committed: he was the brother who sold Yosef into slavery, and he neglected to marry off his youngest son to his daughter-in-law, Tamar, thus leaving her an Aguna and childless. In both cases his deep admission of guilt and responsibility not only healed the pain he caused, it actually gave birth to a new and more positive reality.

Kind David, Yehuda's descendent, whose sins far exceeded even those of his great, great-grandfather, was also the ultimate human model for introspection, genuine remorse and taking responsibility. He is therefore also THE Biblical archetype of intimacy, love, closeness, and at-one-ment.

It is from King David that the Messiah is destined to arrive. Indeed, it may very well be that the Messianic era we will carry us from a culture of covering to that of cleansing - a time in which our social egos will weaken - enhancing our ability to acknowledge, take responsibility, reach, and maintain deep intimacy.

May we make blessed choices in the coming year, and know how to take responsibility for the ones that turn out to be less so.

Gmar Chatima Tova, and a meaningful fast,

Elisha