



ICJW Online Study Program

“The Jewish Festivals”

YOM KIPPUR – REFLECTIONS ON ISAIAH

Coming only once a year – this “highest” of the “High Holydays” celebrated every Fall by Jews all over the world – is precious to all of us for many reasons.

The memories of childhood with the presence of our parents beside us; the special feeling of detachment from the world, called forth by our fasting and the long hours spent in prayers and reflections in the Synagogue; the closeness of the family praying together – all these unite to form the “specialness” of this day.

During these many hours the pivotal prayers are indeed repeated many times. We confess through the rote of *ashamnu, bagadnu* (we are guilty, we have betrayed, we have robbed...) to a myriad of sins – some of which we commit perhaps daily (tale bearing, haughtiness, lack of respect for parents or teachers) or never (robbery, betrayal). Over and over again, we have begged to be forgiven for evil deeds and evil thoughts. We listen to the Torah portion describing the sacrifices brought by the High Priest Aaron and learn from the final section of the reading that this is the day on which – if we duly fast and subject our bodies to physical deprivation and mortify our flesh – God will cleanse us of our sins!

And then the impassioned words of Isaiah burst upon our ears, clarifying what God *really* expects of us. The outward show, the purely physical scourging of the body, is not the penitence God requires, says Isaiah. *True contrition expresses itself in action designed to relieve the suffering of others.* He spells this out quite explicitly: it is “to let the oppressed go free” (58:6), specifically (as 58:3 indicates), to refrain from exploiting our servants and subordinates; not to fast, but rather to share our bread with the hungry; not to lie in ashes, but rather to take the wretched poor into our home; not to wear sackcloth, but to clothe the naked; not to be concerned solely with self, but to care for our kith and kin. In other words, God is more concerned with our behavior to other human beings, particularly those less fortunate than ourselves, than with acts of self-abasement designed to impress the Deity.

When we fulfill our duties to our fellow beings, perform the *mitzvot bein adam lechavero* (injunctions governing our behavior to others), then shall we achieve personal and national redemption.

In its stress on correct interpersonal relations as a vital and essential accompaniment to ritual worship, in fact even more important than the latter if we are to achieve redemption, the Yom Kippur *Haftara* enlarges upon one of the central messages of Rosh Hashana prayer, in the course of which we are assured that severe judgement and retribution for our sins can be averted by *Teshuva* (penitence), *Tefila* (prayer) and *Tzedaka* (charity). The object (or target) of each of these activities is different.

Teshuva demands honest self-scrutiny and reflection. It is a process between me and my *own self*.

Tefila embodies my relationship with *God*.

Tzedaka regulates my relationship with my *fellow human beings*.

Together, these three elements – the individual, the divine and the societal – constitute our entire existence as believing beings.

Despite the fact that Jewish prayer is codified in a fixed form, we can take the time out on Yom Kippur to make the set liturgy more meaningful by adding a *Techine* - an improvised prayer of our own. What is



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here offered is a personal version both of the recurring *Al Chait* and of *Avinu Malkeinu* (our Father, our King), the moving supplication with which we end the *Ne'ila* (closing) service before the gates of Heaven close for another year.

A TECHINE FOR YOM KIPPUR

O God, creator of Heaven and Earth, creator of humankind and of all living things, grant me the power to feel as others feel, the power to listen and to hear, to behold and truly see, to touch and be touched.

Keep fresh within me the memory of my own suffering and the suffering of *Clal Yisrael* (the whole community), not in order to stimulate eternal paranoia, but rather that I may better understand the suffering of strangers; and may that understanding lead me to do everything in my power to alleviate and to prevent such suffering.

When I see the streams of refugees bearing the pathetic belongings they have salvaged from ruined homes, may I recall the wanderings of the people of Israel and may I vow never to be the cause of loss and homelessness.

Enable me to be like Yourself – to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, tend the sick, comfort the bereaved. Guide me in the ways of *Tikkun Olam*, of mending the world. As I delight in a loving marriage of true minds, may I never forget the thousands of women battered and beaten by their spouses. As I rejoice in the bliss of my children and grandchildren, may I never forget the pleading eyes and swollen bellies of starving infants deprived of physical and emotional nourishment. May my woman's capacities for concern, compassion and caring never be dulled by complacency or personal contentment. May my feelings always lead me to act.

Grant me the wisdom to discern what is right and what is wrong and inspire me with the courage to speak out whenever I see injustice, without shame or fear of personal retribution. Enable me to feel pity even for my enemies. Grant me the will and the ability to be a peacemaker, so that the day may soon come when all peoples will live in friendship and your tabernacle of peace will be spread over all the dwellers on earth.
Amen

God and God of our ancestors, forgive me my sins of pride and conceit, my obtuseness to the needs, desires and ambitions of others, my lack of empathy, my ignorance and obliviousness to all that is going on in the world save what is directly related to my own experience and that of the Jewish people. Forgive us our arrogance and narrowness of vision; forgive us our readiness to inflict pain on those who have hurt us. Make us whole, make us holy.

Taken from “Repentance, Responsibility and Regeneration: Reflections on Isaiah” by Alice Shalvi. Printed 1997 in “Beginning Anew” – A Woman’s Companion to the High Holy Days (Compiled by Gail Twersky Reimer and Judith A. Kates)