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# Yom Kippur: Learning To Forgive...Ourselves

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## Yom Kippur – The Day of The Great Cover-Up

If I asked most of you to choose one word that best summarizes Yom Kippur what would it be? Atonement? Forgiveness? What's the theme of Yom Kippur, of this Day of Atonement? What does the word *Kippur* / *Kapparah* really mean anyway?

The answer might surprise you. *Kaparah* doesn't mean Atonement (which is a Christian term). It means to cover or protect:

- Noach covered the Ark with *Kofer* to keep it waterproof:

“*V'Chafarta Otah Mibayit U'Michutz BaKofer*” (*Breishit* 6:14)

- Yaakov sends Eisav gifts to appease him and thereby protect his family:

“*Achapra Panav BiMincha HaHolechet Lefanai*” (*Breishit* 32:21)

- The Kaporet covered the Holy Ark:

“*V'Asita Kaporet Zahav Tahor*” (*Shemot* 25:17-22)

So what does that mean when it comes to translating Yom Kippur? **The Day of the Great Cover-Up?** Is that what Yom Kippur is, just some cover up? We'll just sweep all our sins under the rug and pretend they never happened?

No. What it means is that all year long we spend so much time going undercover, making up excuses. Our job on Yom Kippur is to wash off the make-up, to uncover the truth, to beat our chests until we get beneath the surface, to reveal everything we've been in denial about, and to let our true selves come out.

But after we expose ourselves to the light and make ourselves vulnerable, Hashem promises us that He will cover us up, that He will protect us. **The more we uncover ourselves, the more He will cover us up.**

It's like a photographer developing pictures. He has to go into a dark room before he develops the images, because otherwise, if he exposes them to too much light, they will be destroyed. So Yom Kippur is this magical day where Hashem takes us under his *Tallis* and helps us develop our images by protecting us and by sheltering us.

## God's Tallis

One of my favorite memories of the holidays growing up is standing with my father during the blessing of the *Kohanim*. I always remember feeling so safe and protected when my father would take me with him under his *Tallis*. It's a beautiful custom, but what's the reason for it? Why must we go under the *Tallis* during the priestly blessing?

It's not just that we are not supposed to see the *Kohanim* blessing us. I think it's to remind us that the blessing is that God will keep us under His Tallis, that He will shelter and protect us, so that we can develop ourselves in His image.

And maybe that's the meaning of the *gemara* (*Rosh Hashana* 17b) that says that after the sin of the Golden Calf, God wrapped Himself in His Tallis and showed Moshe the 13 *Middot HaRachamim*, the 13 Attributes of Mercy. The *Tallis* symbolizes protection. And God is showing Moshe that it's not too late. That He is waiting to embrace us and to protect us with Mercy.

Let me share with you an unbelievable story from the Talmud (*Yoma* 39b) about the *Kohein Gadol* on Yom Kippur. And here too we find the symbolism of God's *Tallis*:

The story is told about Shimon Hatzaddik, one of the last *Kohein Gadols*, (High Priests). One year, on his way out of the Temple after Yom Kippur, he turns to the people and he says that this will be his last Yom Kippur. He will not live to see the next Yom Kippur. How does he know this, the people ask? Listen to what he answers them:

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*“Bechol Yom HaKippurim Haya Mizdamen Li Zaken Echad Lavush Levanim V’Atuf Levanim, Nichnas Imi V’Yatza Imi”.*

*Because every year, on Yom Kippur, I see an old man draped in a white Tallis, who escorts me in and out of the Kodesh HaKodashim, of the Holy of Holies.*

*“VeHayom Nizdamen Li Zaken Echad Lavush Shechorim V’Atuf Shechorim, Nichnas Imi V’Lo Yatza Imi”.*

*But this year the old man was draped in black, and he escorted me into the Kodesh Hakodashim, but not out.*

And sure enough, the *gemara* concludes, one week after Sukkot, Shimon Hatzaddik passed away.

What is the symbolism of the Old Man in the White Tallis? And how did Shimon Hatzaddik know that this was going to be the year that he would die?

I would like to suggest that the Old Man in white represents God. When Shimon Hatzaddik saw that the Man was draped in black instead of white, when he saw that the Man came in with him, but didn’t escort him out, he knew that this would be his last Yom Kippur on this earth. Because he felt that God no longer believed in him or had confidence in him as a leader. And so he felt that it was only a matter of time before he died.

But the truth is that maybe it wasn’t God who stopped believing in Shimon Hatzaddik. Maybe Shimon Hatzaddik stopped believing in himself.

And if the *Kohein Gadol* can stop believing in himself, on Yom Kippur, in the Kodesh HaKodashim, then don’t you think it’s possible that we sometimes stop believing in ourselves too?

### **God Never Gives Up On Us**

I think on some level we all struggle with this. We feel like it’s too late. This is who we are. This is what we know. This is what we do. And we don’t allow ourselves the chance to improve because we think God has given up on us as well. We think of God as Godzilla, an angry God, who is disappointed in us and wants to punish us. We think of Him as a God wrapped in black instead of white. We think of

Yom Kippur as a scary day, when it’s really one of the happiest days of the year (*Taanit* 31a).

But the truth is that God hasn’t given up on us at all. We have given up on ourselves.

You see, a parent never gives up on their child. No matter what, we always believe in our children, that they can do better, that they have great potential.

God is our Father, and He never stops believing in us.

No one knew this better, that it’s never too late, than the great Rabbi Akiva, who didn’t start learning Aleph-Bet until the age of 40, and went on to become one of the greatest sages. Listen to the words of Rabbi Akiva, who describes the idea that it’s never too late (*Yoma* 85b):

*Amar Rabbi Akiva, Ashreichem Yisrael Lifnei Mi Atem Mitaharin? Mi Metaher Etchem? Avichem Shebashamayim.*

*Said Rabbi Akiva, How fortunate you are Israel, before whom do you purify yourselves? Who purifies you? YOUR FATHER IN HEAVEN.*

You know why it’s never too late, why God never gives up on us, no matter how long it has been, no matter how many chances we have missed? Because He is our father and He loves us.

I heard a story about Reb Shlomo Carlebach. During the *Aseret Yemei Teshuva* he would walk around with a smile on his face, whistling a happy tune. And his students would ask him, how can you be so calm and happy? Aren’t you scared of the *Din*, of the judgment of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur? You know what he answered them? He said “I’m happy because the judge is my father.”

Reb Shlomo understood, that yes, we have to do Teshuva. We have to beat our chests and uncover all the spiritual plaque that has been building up over the year. But that ultimately, the point of Yom Kippur is not to punish us – it’s to give us a cleaning. He understood the meaning of *Avinu Malkeinu*, that God is not just our King, but He is also our Father.

### **The Danger of Yiush**

So yes, Yom Kippur is all about Forgiveness. It’s about God forgiving us. It’s about us forgiving

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others. But there's a 3<sup>rd</sup> type of forgiveness which I'd like us to think about, a type of forgiveness which is central to this Day of Atonement. A type of forgiveness which I think often gets overlooked. And that is forgiving ourselves.

Because if we truly feel remorse for past mistakes or missed opportunities, then our friends will forgive us, and God will forgive us. The question of Yom Kippur is will we forgive ourselves?

You know, there's a mitzvah in the Torah known as *Hashavat Aveida*, returning a lost object. Rather than say Finder's Keepers, the Torah says that we should do our best to find the owner and return the item he lost.

But the *halacha* says that once the owner has *Yiush*, once he gives up hope of ever retrieving his lost object, the object becomes ownerless, and anyone can keep it.

Says the **Izbitcher**, one of the great Chassidic Masters, you see from here such a powerful idea! That when a person has *Yiush*, when a person gives up hope, he loses everything!

And this isn't just true when it comes to losing one's property. It's true about losing oneself! So many of us give up on ourselves! We have *Yiush*! We don't think we can change! We think it's too late!

Says the Torah "*V'Hashevoto Lo*," there is a mitzvah to return. *Hashava* comes from the same *shoresh*, the same root, as *Teshuva*. It means to return! *Teshuva* tells us not to give up! Don't have *Yiush*! It's not too late!

### **Chutz M'Acher**

One of the most tragic stories in the entire Talmud is the story of Elisha Ben Avuya, of Acher. Elisha Ben Avuya was one of the greatest of the sages. He was the teacher of the great R' Meir! And yet, something happened and he went off the *derech*. He stopped believing and he stopped practicing.

He became a *Kofer*, a heretic, which by the way is also from the same root as *Kaper*, to cover. Because when a person denies God he is really just covering up his own feelings of guilt or inadequacy. It's a defense mechanism, because sometimes a person feels that if it's all about God then where do I fit in

to the picture? And that's what happened to Elisha Ben Avuya.

But that's not even the real tragic part of the story. The gemara tells us (*Chagigah* 15a) that Elisha Ben Avuya's student R' Meir kept trying to bring his Rebbi back, to help him return to the right path. He didn't give up on his Rebbi. He still believed in him.

The problem was that the Elisha Ben Avuya didn't believe in himself. He said to himself, since I've already lost my share in the World to Come I might as well live it up in this world and do whatever I want. He goes to a prostitute and offers to pay her for her services. She recognizes him and says, "aren't you the sage Elisha Ben Avuya?" In response, he uproots a radish from the ground on Shabbat, to show that he's not that person anymore. And you know what she responds? She says "*Acher Hu* – this must be someone else." The Elisha Ben Avuya that I heard of would never act this way. And that phrase, "*Acher Hu*," sticks with him. It becomes a nickname. He is known simply as "*Acher*," as someone else.

One day, Acher hears a *Bat Kol*, a voice from heaven that says "*Shuvu Banim Shovavim Chutz M'Acher* – Return wayward sons, except for Acher." And he says to himself, "You see? I knew there was no hope for me. Even if I wanted to do *Teshuva*, I have been rejected by God." And Acher dies, never having returned to his true self.

It's a tragic story. But it's also such a hard story to come to terms with. How can it be that a voice from heaven announces that everyone can do *Teshuva* except for Acher? Haven't we been saying that it's never too late? That God loves us and always believes in us? Could it really be that God gave up on Acher?

Says **Rav Aharon Soloveitchik**, no. God never gave up on Acher, and He never gives up on any of us. "*Shuvu Banim Shovavim Chutz M'Acher*" doesn't mean everyone can do *Teshuva* except for Acher. It means "*Shuvu Banim Shovavim*" – Return Wayward Sons. "*Chutz M'Acher*" – Leave Acher! Go out from Acher. Stop being this other person, and go back to being your true self, Elisha Ben Avuya.

It's never too late to do *Teshuva*. We can make mistake after mistake, and still come back. But we have to believe in ourselves. And we have to be able to forgive ourselves. If we don't believe in

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ourselves, if we have *Yiush* and think there's no hope, then we'll be lost.

### Learning To Forgive Ourselves

Yom Kippur is about forgiveness. But it's not just about forgiving others. It's about forgiving ourselves as well. Because we can't move forward if we're still stuck in the past.

You know, we usually translate the word *Aveira* to mean sin. But *Aveira* comes from the word *Avar*, the past. It means that a Jew should look at mistakes as the past. It's history. We have to learn from past mistakes. But today is a brand new day, with brand new choices and possibilities.

And now let me share with you an amazing *Midrash Tanchuma*. The Midrash asks, why is it that when it comes to someone who does a mitzvah we call them a Bar/Bat Mitzvah, but when it comes to someone who sins we call them a *Baal Aveira*? Bar/Bat means a son or daughter. But Baal means an owner. Why the difference?

Says the Midrash, because when it comes to a mitzvah it's like the relationship of parent and child. No matter what, it can never be broken. But when it comes to a sin, you're not stuck. You can disown the sin, and move away.

The story is told about a teacher holding up a glass of water in front of his students and asking them how heavy they think it is. They all give different guesses (2 ounces, 5 ounces, 10 ounces). But he says you're all wrong. The answer is that it depends how long you hold onto it. The longer we hold onto something the heavier it gets.

It's true. We've made mistakes. We have hurt people, sometimes on purpose, and sometimes because we were so self-absorbed. We have settled for average in our relationship with God. And for those mistakes we have to make amends. But at some point, we have to put the glass down and move on. We cannot dwell on the past, because if we do we will sacrifice our future.

The word *Teshuva* means Response. It's ok to slip up. We all do. We're only human. The question of Yom Kippur is how will we respond when we fall? Will we be stuck in the past, or will we pick ourselves up off the mat and move forward?

### As Long As The Candle Is Still Burning It's Still Possible To Mend

The story is told about **Reb Yisrael Salanter**, the great founder of the Mussar Movement. Rabbi Salanter is staying at an inn one night and he can't sleep. So he gets up to go for a walk. And he sees down the hall a shoemaker working by candlelight on a pair of shoes. Reb Yisrael approaches him and he says, "It's so late at night, and you're still hard at work?" And listen to the answer that the shoemaker gives him. He says "As long as the candle is still burning it's still possible to mend."

Reb Yisrael used to say that he learned such a powerful lesson that night from that shoemaker working late into the night. As long as we haven't given up hope, as long as we still believe in ourselves, as long as our candle is still burning, it's not too late.

### Yizkor-Lighting Our Candle From The Candle Of Our Ancestors

Before Yom Tov began we light a *Yizkor* Candle in memory of our departed. Maybe part of what lighting the *Yizkor* candle is all about, is reminding ourselves that our candles burn bright because they are fueled by the candles of our ancestors who came before us.

Think of all the people who have impacted our lives and are no longer with us. Each of us can think of people who have influenced us and are no longer with us. It can be a grandparent, an uncle, and aunt, or even a teacher.

What did you learn from them? What did they teach you?

I think maybe when a person dies their flame doesn't just go out. Perhaps they pass it on to all their loved ones. Their flame combines with our flame. It gives it more fuel, and it helps it burn brighter.

That means that our candle is made up of the fuel from so many other people who came before us, and who brightened our lives. And it means that when we go to *shamayim*, after 120 years, we will light the flames of those whom we have impacted and influenced. The flame of our loved ones continues to shine brightly through us. We are the *Yartzeit* Candle.

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And so, as we say *Yizkor*, and we remember all the candles that have given light to us over the years, we are reminded as well of our own flame. We are reminded of how bright it shines, of how much potential it has.

And we are reminded that “As Long As The Candle Is Still Burning It’s Still Possible To Mend.” Our ancestors believed in us. They still do. And maybe part of *Yizkor* is reminding ourselves to believe in us as well.

### **Conclusion**

This Yom Kippur, as we wrap ourselves in our *Tallis* and pray, let’s remember that God is wrapping us in His *Tallis* today as well.

Let’s remember that the Judge is our Father who loves us.

Let’s remember that we should never have *Yiush*, because it’s never too late.

Let’s remember that God believes in us, our ancestors believe in us, and that we should believe in ourselves as well.

And let’s remember that our candle burns brightly, and that “*as long as the candle is still burning it’s still possible to mend.*”