



YOM KIPPUR - MR PINCHOS COOPER

The Rambam writes in Hilchot Teshuva (1:3) that the essence of Yom Kippur atones for those who repent. This is derived from the verse in the Kriat Hatora for Yom Kippur

”Ki vayom hazeh yechaperaleychem letaher etchem mikol chatoteychem lifney Hashem tit’haru “.For on this day He will atone for you to cleanse you from all of your sins, before Hashem you will be cleansed.”

In Hilchot Shegagot (3:10) the Rambam also writes that atonement is only effective for those who believe in its power. What is the essence of Yom Kippur and how does it function?

The verse quoted above spoke of “Lechaper” – to atone and “Letaher” – to cleanse. Rav S. R. Hirsch explains thus: - Yom Kippur brings us a covering or protection from the consequences of our wrongdoing, cleanses us and allows us to wipe the slate clean so that we may begin afresh. The consequences of our wrongdoings are twofold and embedded in nature from the first day of creation. Firstly, sin requires punishment, which is an automatic consequence of the sin; “Your evil will cause you to suffer.” (Jeremiah 2:19). The world was created by G-d thus, sin must be punished, if not immediately then later. This is the external consequence of sin. Secondly, sin affects the soul in such a way as to contaminate it and make it easier for the person to sin again in the same way. Chazal tell us that once a person has repeated his sin, it becomes to him as if permitted. “The reward for sin is sin.” (Avot 4:2) A person’s ability to make good decisions in the future is hampered by his poor decisions in the past. This is the internal consequence of sin.

The name Elokim is associated with G-ds’ creation of the world, with its physical laws and its spiritual or supernatural laws as described above. However, the four letter name of Hashem describes the fact that Hashem retains the ability to change these rules as and when He sees fit. Miracles are an example of Hashem changing the physical laws of nature. Yom Kippur is when Hashem changes the spiritual rules in terms of crime and punishment, as per the verse; “Before Hashem you will be cleansed.” Hashem, Who changes the rules as he sees fit.

On Yom Kippur, Hashem provides atonement, protection from physical retribution (lechaperaleychem) so that we can avoid the external consequences of our sin. The essence of the day atones and protects. On Yom Kippur, Hashem also cleanses the soul (letaher etchem), protects the soul from the harmful effects of previous wrongdoings so that it will not contaminate the soul in the future. The slate is wiped clean; we start again with a pure unblemished soul.

All this, so that “lifnei Hashem tit’haru”, before Hashem, Who chooses to change the laws of nature, or supernature on Yom Kippur to give us the opportunity to start afresh. Unfortunately, none of this works without Teshuva. If we can tune in to the essence of the day and use it to achieve Teshuva, at least in some areas, we can reap the benefits of the kindness of Hashem Who allows us to begin again. The Maharal writes that if a person repents only from some of his sins, Hashem will accept his Teshuva and cleanse him from those sins, even though he has not repented from others. Menake lashavim ve’eyno menake le’eynam shavim. Partial repentance is partially effective.

May we all merit Teshuva and Kapara and may you never walk alone.