

Dr. Lustiger, a polymer scientist at Exxon Research & Engineering, annotated and summarized *Before Hashem You Shall Be Purified: Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik on the Days of Awe*.

## AN ENIGMATIC EQUATION IN THE TESHUVA LECTURES OF RABBI JOSEPH B. SOLOVEITCHIK

Between the years 1964-1980, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zt"l* ("the Rav") would annually present a 2-3 hour discourse (*teshuva derasha*) during the Ten Days of Repentance. Each *derasha* dealt with a range of diverse topics related to the *Yamim Nora'im*, and the Rav would weave halakha, homiletics and personal reminiscence to create discourses that were among his most compelling. For those pulpit rabbis in the audience, the same themes would often be replayed in their own *Yom Kippur* sermons.

Most of the topics that the Rav covered in these *derashot* would be self-contained and were not revised in subsequent years. Subjects such as *shofar* (1974 and 1975), the halakhic status of *erev Yom Kippur* (1976), the various appellations for *Yom Kippur* (1977), *selihot* (1978) and the *avoda* of *Yom Kippur* (1979) were in a sense the Rav's final word on these topics, at least in the context of these *derashot*.<sup>1</sup>

However, there is one topic that the Rav would review, and occasionally revise in subtle ways, in at least six of his *derashot*. This topic was the *itsumo shel yom*: the nature of the atonement afforded by the day of *Yom Kippur* itself. The Rav, in his 1976 *derasha*, referred to the mechanism underlying the *itsumo shel yom* as a "mystery," but this fact did not daunt him from shedding new light on this concept in numerous *derashot*.

The Rav's apparent struggle to explicate this concept resulted in a most enigmatic statement in his penultimate *teshuva derasha* of 1979. In one portion of the *derasha*, the Rav discussed the recitation by the *Kohen Gadol* of the ineffable Name of God during the *avoda*. The key phrase in the *Kohen Gadol's vidui* as cited in the Talmud Yerushalmi, and quoted by *Tosafot* (*Yoma* 35b), is: *Ana, baShem kapper na*, please,

through the Name grant atonement. The Rav emphasized that the prepositional prefix *bet* in this context does not mean “in”, but rather “through”.<sup>2</sup> He pointed out that a similar use of the “instrumental *bet*” is also found in the verse: *Ki va-yom ha-ze ye-khapper aleikhem* (*Leviticus* 16:30), which the Rav again translated not as “in” or “on” but rather “through this day He will atone for you.” This verse forms the basis for the concept of *itsumo shel yom*, that the day of *Yom Kippur* itself provides atonement.

Based on grammatical constructs, the Rav made what seemed to be a most enigmatic observation in his 1979 *teshuva derasha*:<sup>3</sup>

*Kappara* is equal to the *itsumo shel yom* on the one hand. And *kappara* is [also] equal to the Honored and Awesome Name (*Shem haNikhbad ve-haNora*). If B equals C and A equals C, so what is the conclusion? B equals A; the *itsumo shel yom* is the Great and Holy Name of the *Ribbono Shel Olam*. . . . The holiness of the *itsumo shel yom* is the holiness of the Great and Holy Name. *Yom Kippur* provides atonement because it has the holiness of the *Ribbono Shel Olam* [derived] from the Great and Holy Name.

For this reason the [author of the] *Benei Yissaskhar* writes that the hasidic masters never used the appellation ‘*Yom Kippur*’; they referred to the day as ‘*Yom haKadosh*’.”<sup>4</sup>

The Rav continued by saying that when he had the privilege to read correspondence between his grandfather, R. Hayyim Soloveitchik *zt”l*, and hasidic masters of the time, the hasidim would exclusively refer to the day as *Yom haKadosh*.

This statement goes beyond assigning some undefined metaphysical similarity to the respective atonements afforded by the recitation of the Ineffable Name on one hand and the *itsumo shel yom* on the other. In some unexplained sense, the Rav actually equates the holiness of the day of *Yom Kippur* with the holiness of the name of *Hashem*, as illustrated by the hesitance of the hasidic masters to refer to *Yom Kippur* explicitly, just as *Hashem*’s Name is never explicitly mentioned in conversation or correspondence.

Apart from the parallel use of the instrumental preposition, i.e., the letter *bet* in *baShem* and *va-yom*, are there other sources which led the Rav to reach such a startling conclusion?

## YOM KIPPUR = SHEM HASHEM

I submit that the Rav was in a sense compelled to reach this conclusion based on numerous points that he made in this and previous *teshuva derashot*. These points are as follows:

A) The Rav, almost without fail, annually revisited the famous homily of Rabbi Akiva in his *teshuva derashot*:

Rabbi Akiva said: Happy are you, O Israel. Before whom are you purified and who purifies you? Your Father in Heaven, as it is stated: "And I will sprinkle on you purifying waters and you shall be cleansed, and it states: "Hashem is the hope [lit. 'Mikve'] of Israel"; just as a *mikve* purifies the impure, so does the Holy One blessed Be He purify Israel.

The final statement of Rabbi Akiva provides impetus to the Rav's equation. If Hashem is indeed "the *Mikve* of Israel", i.e. the source of Israel's purity on *Yom Kippur*, and the *itsumo shel yom* serves the same function, then the two must be somehow equivalent (1979).

B) In discussing the halakhic significance of *erev Yom Kippur*, the Rav cited the opinion of Ramban that the main *vidui* of *Yom Kippur* is a confession that one says after sunset but before nightfall (Ramban, *Hiddushim leMasekhet Yoma* 87b). According to the Rav, Ramban derives this halakha from the same familiar verse, "For through this day he will atone for you, to purify you from all your sins; before Hashem you shall be purified." The Rav explains that according to Ramban, the word "before" in this verse signifies a point in time rather than a point in space. Ramban thus interprets the phrase "before Hashem you shall be purified" in the sense that prior to the time (*lifnei . . .*) one enters *Yom Kippur* (*Hashem . . .*), one must be purified (*ti-tharu*) through the *vidui* recitation. The Rav's equation is here most explicit (1976).

C) A close reading of the *vidui* of the *Kohen Gadol* reveals an apparent anomaly: "Please, through Your Name Hashem, forgive the errors, iniquities and sins . . . as it is written in the Torah of your servant Moses: 'For through this day He will atone for you, to purify you, from all your sins before Hashem you will be purified.'" Taken in strict context, the biblical verse is cited by the *Kohen Gadol* as a means of buttressing his request for atonement through God's Name. If there were no equivalence between atonement through His Name and atonement through the day, then recitation of the verse by the *Kohen Gadol* in this context would be irrelevant to his request (1979).

D) Finally, the Rav maintains that the word *itsumo* means strength.

One reason that the *Yom Kippur* prayer continually invokes the holiness of the day (the *kedushat ha-yom*) is so we are prompted to feel the *itsumo shel yom*. According to the Rav, the potency of the day is subjective, directly proportional to the closeness that one feels to God (1973, 1976, 1978). Although the equation between the *kedusha* of *Yom Kippur* and the *kedusha* of Hashem's Name is quite startling, I believe that the Rav had laid out the halakhic and philosophical underpinnings for such a concept in his *teshuva derashot* as well as in his previously published work.

### THE TETRAGRAMMATON, QUALITATIVE TIME AND YOM KIPPUR

The Names "*Elokim*" and "YKVK" (the Tetragrammaton) have regularly been noted by Hazal as signifying *midat ha-din* (the divine attribute of justice) and *midat ha-rahamim* (the divine attribute of mercy) respectively. The Rav clarified this dichotomy in his 1977 *derasha*, where he discussed the use of these two appellations in the context of the first two chapters of *Genesis*.

As laid out by the Rav, the physical world is governed by quantitative rules; a stone falls according to a precise mathematical equation. This is the world in which "day and night shall not cease" (*Genesis* 8:22), where the physical reality of time progression, of day and night, the sun setting and rising in a prescribed manner, is invariant. In this world, the act of *teshuva* is an irrational gesture, since it is impossible to undo the cause and effect of past events. Such a world is described in the first chapter of *Genesis*, a world in which the name of God as *Elokim*, signifying *midat ha-din*, the divine attribute of strict justice, is used. Indeed, the biblical term often used to signify a human judge is likewise "*elohim*".<sup>5</sup> To a human judge, serious crime cannot go unpunished; the defendant's remorse or resolve not to repeat his sin do not influence the verdict.

In *Halakhic Man*,<sup>6</sup> the Rav discusses the irrationality of *teshuva* in a world governed only by physical time:

There is a past and there is a future that are connected with one another and with the present only through the law of causality—the cause found at moment A links up with the effect taking place at moment B, and so on. However, time itself as past appears only as "no more" and as future appears as "not yet". From this perspective repentance is an

empty and hollow concept. It is impossible to regret a past that is already dead, lost in the abyss of oblivion. . . .

There is, however, a second component to creation with a different set of cosmic rules. The concept of *teshuva*, whereby one can erase and even elevate previous sinful actions, suggests that one can transcend physical reality and causality through the exercise of free will. For this reason, *teshuva* was one of seven ideas created prior to the physical world (*Nedarim* 39b). This alternate concept of reality is introduced in the second chapter of *Genesis*, where the name “YKVK” is mentioned. In contrast to *Elokim*, the Tetragrammaton invokes God as One who possesses *midat ha-rahamim*, the attribute of mercy.

Although not stated explicitly in the Rav’s 1977 derasha, this second component of creation is presumably connoted by the Tetragrammaton due to the Name’s merging of *haya*, *hove* and *yi-hye*, past, present and future. Only when God in judgement merges time in this way can man be judged meritorious despite his previous sinful actions. Only through this integration of time does the act of *teshuva* have meaning.

Since transcending causality is the very essence of the *teshuva* imperative, any explication of *teshuva* must be based on an alternate understanding of the notion of time.<sup>7</sup> The Rav outlines this understanding in his classic essay “Sacred and Profane—*Kodesh* and *Chol* in World Perspectives”<sup>8</sup>:

While quantitative time is measured by the clock, qualitative time is living and immeasurable, in this time there are not milestones separating past, present and future. It is not unidimensional, as is physical time, but multi-dimensional, compenetrating and overlapping past, present and future.

The relationship between this alternate notion of time and repentance is expounded in more detail in *Halakhic Man*:

Halakhic man is engaged in self-creation, in creating a new “I”. He does not regret an irretrievably lost past but a past still in existence, one that stretches into and interpenetrates with the present and the future... there is a past which persists in its existence . . . a past [which] enters into the domain of the present and links up with the future . . . past, present, and future merge and blend together, and this threefold time structure arises before us adorned with a splendid unity. . . . We do not have here the determinate order of a scientific, causal process. . . . The future imprints its stamp on the past and determines its image. . . .

## TRADITION

The main principle of repentance is that the future dominates the past and there reign over it in unbounded fashion. Sin, as a cause and as the beginning of a lengthy causal chain of destructive acts, can be transformed, underneath the guiding hand of the future, into a source of merit and good deeds, into love and fear of God. The cause is located in the past, but the direction of its development is determined by the future. Great is repentance, for deliberate sins are accounted to him as meritorious deeds [*Yoma* 86b]. . . . In this outlook we find contained the basic principle of choice and free will. . . . If a causal lawfulness molds man's spiritual personality and points the way wherein he must go, then self-creation can have no meaning . . . to be sure, each cause gives rise to a new causal sequence. But this sequence can oftentimes head in various directions. . . . If man so desires, it will travel in the direction of eternity; the past will heed his word and attach itself to him.

Perhaps in light of the relationship between *teshuva* and qualitative time, we can understand the juxtaposition of verses in *Psalms* 90: "A prayer of Moses—the man of God."

Before the mountains were born, and You had not yet fashioned the earth and the inhabited land, and from the remotest past to the most distant future, You are God. You reduce man to pulp and You say, "Repent, O sons of man". For even a thousand years in Your eyes are but a bygone yesterday, and like a watch in the night.

The themes of *teshuva* and time are interwoven throughout the chapter. The phrase "a thousand years in your eyes are but a bygone yesterday (*ke-yom etmol*)" suggests not only the compression of physical time, but its reversal as well, consistent with the concept of qualitative time.

The integral connection between qualitative time and *Yom Kippur* can be inferred from a passage in *Rosh haShana* 17b, which describes the scene on Mount Sinai at the very first *Yom Kippur*:

. . . The Holy One Blessed Be He wrapped Himself like someone who leads the prayer services [lit. as an emissary of the congregation or *shali-ah tsibbur*] and demonstrated the prayer service [i.e. recitation of the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy] to Moses, and said to him, "Every time that Israel sins, let them perform this service and I will pardon them."

The Rav explained<sup>9</sup> that the Thirteen Attributes were revealed to Moses at a time that Moses himself was unsure how to entreat God on

behalf of Israel in the wake of the Golden Calf incident. Until this revelation, the possibility of repairing the sociological and metaphysical breach between man and God as a result of sin was entirely unknown to Moses. The fundamental message of the Thirteen Attributes is that this relationship can indeed be restored, based on the talmudic explanation for the initial repetition of the Tetragrammaton: "I am YKVK before man sins, and I am YKVK after man sins and repents" (*Rosh haShana* 17b). Despite having engaged in actions which distance man from God, the sublime relationship of God to the penitent is reinstated, often even strengthened.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, this message is such a strong motif underlying *Yom Kippur* that the Rav insisted that in his shul in Boston *selihot* be recited in the repetition of every *amidah* on *Yom Kippur*, and not only in *ma'ariv* and *ne'illa* as is the typical present-day custom.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, just as the efficacy of *teshuva* is based on the concept of qualitative time, the central motif of *Yom Kippur* as represented by the Thirteen Attributes is similarly based on qualitative time.

The Rav elsewhere cites evidence from Rambam that the *Shem haMeforash* intoned by the *Kohen Gadol* during the *avoda* was in fact the four-letter Tetragrammaton as explicitly pronounced.<sup>12</sup> The Name repeatedly recited by the *Kohen Gadol* on *Yom Kippur* for the purpose of atonement thus invokes the same concept of qualitative time upon which the day of *Yom Kippur* itself is based. The essential nature of *Yom Kippur* is reflected in His Name; the *kedusha* of the Name and the *kedusha* of *Yom Kippur* are identical.

## NOTES

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1. The *derashot* delivered in the late 60's through the early 70's summarized in R. Pinchas Peli, *Al haTeshuva* (World Zionist Organization, 1973) were in general similarly self-contained. It should be noted however, that the Rav would often greatly expand on these points in his summer *yarhei kalla* in Boston, either prior to or after delivery of the *teshuva derasha* itself.
2. Although the version of the *vidui* cited by the Bavli does not include the letter *bet* at all (*Ana Hashem kapper na*), the Yerushalmi version is more accepted, and it is the Yerushalmi rendering that is used in our own present day *avoda* recitation. The Rav in his 1979 *teshuva derasha* noted a similar use of the instrumental *bet* in the *ana be-koah* meditation.
3. Translated from the original Yiddish.

## TRADITION

4. See *Benei Yissaskhar Ma'mar* 8 (*Hodesh Tishrei*) as cited in S.Y. Agnon, *Yamim Nora'im*, for more detail regarding this custom.
5. Psalms 82:1, for example.
6. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1983).
7. Eliezer Goldman explores this relationship in detail in his important essay, "*Teshuva uZeman be Hagut haRav Soloveitchik*", in Avi Saguy (ed.), *Emuna biZmanim Mishtanim* (World Zionist Organization, 1997). In this essay, Goldman describes how the Rav bases his ideas on Scheller's concept of "internal time consciousness" and Bergson's "qualitative time," respectively.
8. *Gesher* (June 1966), pp. 5-29.
9. "*Hashivut Amirat Selihot beYom ha-Kippurim*", *Mesora* volume 15 pp. 18-20.
10. For example, in the case of *teshuva me-ahava* (*Yoma* 86b).
11. See *Mesora*, op. cit., for the numerous sources cited by the Rav for such multiple *selihot* recitation.
12. See *Shiurim leZekher Abba Mori* volume 2 (Jerusalem 1985), pp. 164-181: "*BeInyan Mehikat haShem*". A somewhat different view appears in volume 2 of Rabbi H. Reichmann's summary of the Rav's *shiurim* on *Masekhet Shevuot*, pages 96-97 on *Shevuot* 35a, where he cites the Rav as suggesting that the Name pronounced by the *Kohen Gadol* was in fact the 12, 42 and/or 72 letter utterance, based on a passage in *Kiddushin* 71a. However, even in the R. Reichmann *shiur* summary the Rav emphasized that the written name remained the four letter *YKVK*: only the pronunciation varied, conceptually similar to our present day pronunciation of the Tetragrammaton as *Ado-nai*.