



נחמנו נחמנו...

The Day of Atonement

Rambam, following the Sages of the Mishnah, rules that the day of Yom Kippur itself atones for the sins of those who repent (*Yad Hilchos Teshuva* 1:3 after *Yoma* 85b). What gives Yom Kippur this power, unique among the days of the year?

To address this question I quote a passage from *Od Yosef Chai* (Parshat Tazriah) by Rabbi Yosef Chaim ben Eliyahu, “Ben Ish Chai.” [Below in italics].

“If the live flesh returns to being white, the metzora shall go back to the Cohen [who earlier pronounced him impure]. The Cohen shall see the lesion. Behold, the lesion has turned to white, the Cohen shall declare the lesion to be pure, and it is thereby pure.” (Vayikra 13:16,17). This section may be explained as follows. Throughout the year, the job of the prosecuting angel is to charge the Jewish people for their sins. Yom Kippur is the exception. On Yom Kippur, the prosecuting angel turns from adversary to advocate, and pleads on behalf of the Jewish People. HaKadosh Baruch Hu commands us to give a “scapegoat” [lit: goat sent to azazel] to the prosecuting angel to induce him to side with the defense. It is in this sense that “the goat bears all their transgressions” (Vayikra 16:22).

Why, though, should HaKadosh Baruch Hu have us offer an inducement to the prosecution to switch sides when He anyway knows whether the charges are true or false? Surely HaKadosh Baruch Hu does not need the angels in order to pass



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judgement! Furthermore, Yom Kippur is a day when a Jew who repents for his sins is automatically forgiven and pardoned. Let the angel rant and rail against the Jews! Hakadosh Baruch Hu in His compassion guarantees atonement on this day. The angel's charges would anyway prove ineffective.

We may answer these questions by means of a parable. A gentile king once appointed a Jew to serve as his viceroy. The king esteemed the Jew for his prudence and wisdom. Under the Jew's governance, the kingdom flourished and became an international superpower. A gentile, a tailor by trade, resented the Jewish viceroy's rise to power and plotted to do him in. The tailor's workshop happened to overlook the city's main thoroughfare, on which the king, accompanied by his viceroy, travelled several times a week on royal business. The tailor composed antisemitic verse which he put to music. The next time the king's carriage passed by, the tailor chanted his antisemitic songs out loud. The king was enraged. He ordered his Jewish viceroy to arrest the tailor and cut off his tongue. But the viceroy did not follow the letter of the king's order. In place of punishment, the viceroy summoned the tailor to a private reception, greeted him warmly, plied him with food and drink, and sent him on his way without even a word of rebuke. Mollified, the tailor went home and composed songs of praise and acclaim of the Jews. The next time the king rode past the tailor's place accompanied by his viceroy, the tailor once again burst into song. The king was furious with the viceroy for having disobeyed his order to silence the tailor. "His majesty commanded me to cut off the tailor's tongue," said the viceroy, "and I did so. I then replaced it with a new tongue. Let us approach the tailor and hear his words.



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His majesty will see that a new tongue has taken the place of the old.” When the king heard the tailor this time reciting laudations of the Jews, he realized how clever his viceroy’s ruse was, and laughed. The king turned to the viceroy and said, “I now see that you grafted a new tongue onto the man, but it would have pleased me more had you obeyed my original order and severed his tongue.” The viceroy replied in his defense, “His majesty should know that I did this for the sake of your honor. If I had punished the man, your gentile subjects would have put it down to favoritism. The tailor’s antisemitic accusations are correct, they would say, and the king is quashing the truth in deference to his cherished Jewish advisor. Instead, I induced the man to change his tune. He himself now admits that his former charges against the Jews are false, and concedes that the king’s original sentence was just. That admission is proof positive in everyone’s eyes of the justice and righteousness of the king’s decrees.”

By analogy, HaKadosh Baruch Hu wishes us to bribe the accusing angel by making him an offering of a goat. This gift is enough to persuade the accuser to change his tune and sing the praises of the Jews. On Yom Kippur the accusing angel himself concedes that his past indictment of the Jews was null and void.

I now tie the parable back into the passage from Parashat Tazriah quoted earlier: “If the live flesh returns to being white, the metzora shall go back to the. The Cohen shall see the lesion. Behold, the lesion has turned to white, the Cohen shall declare the lesion to be pure, and it is thereby pure.” I read the passage as a literary allusion to purification from sin through repentance, as follows.



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Human beings are termed “flesh” as it is written (Yeshaya 66:23): “All flesh shall come to bow down before me, proclaims HaShem.” The Jewish People are termed “living” as it is written (Devarim 4:4): “You, those attached to HaShem, are all of you living this day.” The idol-worshiping gentile nations are termed “dead” because evildoers even while alive are considered dead [Berachos 18b]. Every Jew is therefore termed “living flesh.”

When a Jew repents on Yom Kippur his sins are treated as good deeds, as it is written (Yeshia 1:18): “Though your sins be as fabric dyed scarlet, they will turn white as snow.”

Accordingly, the passage reads: **“If the live flesh returns to white”** – this alludes to the Jew termed “live flesh” who returns to G-d through repentance and whose sins become pure as it says “they will turn white as snow.” **“The Cohen shall see the lesion”** – “seeing” in this sense means that he validates the sinner’s repentance (see Ramban Bereishis 1:4 s.v. ‘G-d saw the light that it was good’). **“The Cohen”** refers to the angel G-d appoints to convey our repentance to HaKadosh Baruch Hu. HaKadosh Baruch Hu accepts the sinner’s repentance and thereby **“Behold, the lesion has turned to white”** – i.e. the accuser who is termed a “lesion” has now become an advocate of the Jew’s innocence. Then, **“the Cohen shall declare the lesion to be pure”** – this alludes to the charges leveled by the accuser against the Jew during the year, which are now declared null and void on the basis of the accuser’s



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current admission that those charges were false. HaKadosh Baruch Hu thus proclaims the Jew who repents on Yom Kippur: “He is pure” (The Hebrew pronouns for “it” and “he” are identical.)

- Rabbi David Daniel HaCohen