

RABBI MEIR MINSTER

The Cleansing Power of Kindness

AS THE SUMMER ENDS AND THE JEWISH month of Av becomes the month of Elul, we shift our focus from mourning over the loss of the Temple to thoughts of repentance and the judgment of the Days of Awe.

The following incident, from the Talmud, offers a helpful insight.

Once, Rabbi Yochanon Ben Zakai was leaving Jerusalem. Rabbi Yehoshua, who was following him, gazed upon the ruins of the destroyed Temple and said, "Woe to us that this is destroyed—the place in which the sins of the Jewish People were cleansed!" Rabbi Yochanon Ben Zakai responded, "My son, let this not trouble you. There is another, equal source of cleansing, and it is performing acts of kindness (chessed).¹

Having come to appreciate what we have lost with the destruction of the Temple—the means to cleanse ourselves from our sins—the prospect of facing these days of judgment without the Temple would have been even more daunting, if we did not have some type of substitute. Understanding the importance of kindness, and what it can accomplish, is a great source of hope. It is even more comforting when we realize that the opportunities and our ability to perform kindness are limited only by our own imagination. Nevertheless, it would seem that one specific form of kindness is not only most appropriate but most

available at this time of the year.

As part of the process of repentance one must seek out anyone whom he has harmed and beg their forgiveness.² The flip side of this requirement is that the victim must then choose to forgive.

Although any time of the year is appropriate for such overtures, the mood and the call³ of the Days of Awe understandably make them the prime time for such confrontations.

Consider, for a moment, the irony. At the very time that we are concerned about being judged by G-d, some of us will be thrust into a situation where we will suddenly become the judges of others.

With this perspective it may be easier to feel compassion towards one's antagonists. However, sometimes the offenses are great and the wounds are still sore. It is not always easy to forgive, and the challenge to perform this act of kindness becomes a real test. The stakes, however, are high.

On the subject of forgiving others, the Talmud⁴ contains an often-quoted passage.

Rava said, "If anyone forgoes his measure of retribution, [Heaven] will relinquish [punishment] for him for all his sins."

Rava's words suggest that if one forgives others, he too will be forgiven by G-d. This would certainly be a strong motivation to ignore our own feelings of hurt and to extend our pardon. In

fact, on the whole it seems like quite a bargain; trading our offenses and sins against G-d for that which we may have suffered by the hands of others would certainly leave us the winners, by far.

This leads us to ask, then, is it really that easy? Can one escape punishment for his sins by exchanging his own forgiveness for G-d's?

Ben Yehoyada,⁵ basing himself on the words of the Dubno Magid, offers us a simple but sobering, "No!" If our motivation for forgiving is simply to gain G-d's good grace, measure for measure, we cannot be assured of the desired outcome. Of course, even if our motivation is G-d's compassion, it is still a far better thing to forgive than not to forgive at all.⁶ Yet this is not what Rava had in mind when he spoke of relinquishing one's "measure of retribution."

As Ben Yehoyada understands it, the Talmud itself makes this qualification,⁷ when Rabbi Acha ben Chanina notes that the verse upon which Rava bases his guarantee of forgiveness ends with the words "to the remnant of His (G-d's) heritage."⁸ In Rabbi Acha's words,

We have here a fat tail with a thorn in it.⁹ [The verse says] "To the remnant of His inheritance," not "To all of His inheritance." [This means that only] for the one who makes himself a mere remnant [is there forgiveness].¹⁰

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¹ Mesichtos Ketanos, *Avos D'Rabbi Nosson* 4:5

² See Maimonides, *Yad Hachazaka*, Laws of Repentance 2:9.

³ Particularly on the day before Yom Kippur. *Shulchan Aruch* 606:2.

⁴ Talmud, Yoma 87b. (Also, Yoma 23a and *Kesef Mishna*, Laws of Repentance 2:9.)

⁵ Rosh Hashanah 17a

⁶ As the Talmud (*Pesachim* 50b) states, "Rabbi Yehudah said in the name of Rav: A man should always occupy himself with Torah and good deeds, even for ulterior motives, for out of [doing good with] an ulterior motive there comes [doing good] for its own sake."

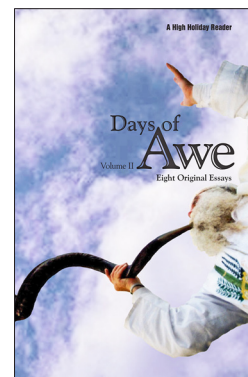
⁷ Rosh Hashanah 17a-b

⁸ *Micha* 7:18

⁹ I.e., good news and bad news. There are words of comfort here, but there is something harsh within them—namely, that Rava's words do not apply to everyone. (Commentary of Rashi, ad loc.)

¹⁰ Talmud, Yoma, *ibid*.

¹¹ This interpretation is supported by Rabbeinu Chananel, ad loc., and Rashi's commentary on *Sanhedrin* 111b. See Maharsha, commentary to Rosh Hashanah 17b.



This essay originally appeared in *Days of Awe*, Volume II, one of many *Holiday Readers* the Kollel has produced. You can download eleven of them, in PDF format, from our web site, cincykollel.org—look for the link labeled "Resources & Links" at the top of the page.

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Rabbis Dani Schon
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🚺🚻🖐️ **Partners in Torah
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Rabbi Binyamin Teitelbaum.....8 PM

Wednesday

🚺🚻🖐️ **Torah Treasures for
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🚺🚻🖐️ **Downtown Lunch-n-Learn
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🖐️🖐️🖐️ **Halacha** (based on the parasha)
Rabbi Chaim Heinemann.....9:10–10 PM
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Minyanim Daylight Time

Shacharis
Sunday8:15 AM
Monday–Friday7:20 AM
ShabbosN/A

Mincha
Sunday7:45 PM
Monday–Thursday5:45 PM
Shabbos6:30 PM

Ma'ariv
In the Beis Midrash:
Sunday–Wednesday9:45 PM
Thursday10 PM
ShabbosN/A

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🖐️ **“Dirshu” Gemara Shiur**
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Rabbi Yitzchok Preis.....
Sunday 7:15–8:15 AM
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🖐️🖐️ **Kollel Yisgaber K'ari**
(amud-a-day of Mishnah B'rurah)
Rabbi Chaim Heinemann.....
Monday–Friday 6:55–7:20 AM

🖐️🖐️ **Kitzur Shuchan Aruch**
Live video conference!
Rabbi Dani Schon.....
Monday–Friday 12:05–12:20 PM

🖐️ **Daf Yomi**
Rabbi Meir Minster.....
Sunday–Thursday 8–8:45 PM
Shabbos (at CZE) 1:00 pre-mincha

🖐️🖐️ **Nightly Halacha Chabura**
Rabbis Dani Schon
& Binyamin Teitelbaum
Monday–Thursday 9–9:45 PM

Chavrusa Learning
(private & small groups).....times vary

The Cleansing Power of Kindness CONTINUED

Ben Yehoyada explains that “remnant” describes someone who possesses an extreme level of humility¹¹ and views himself as a mere remnant. In this way, the victim sees the offense as meaningless, as it was perpetrated against someone of insignificance, and it is therefore easily forgiven. It is achieving this level of humility that is actually the source of G-d’s forgiveness.

There is an important insight here in terms of our desire to do kindness. There can be many different motivations for us to give of ourselves. Often we feel that we must, that we have no choice but to give. Other times we truly want to give. Sometimes, like we saw in regards to forgiving others, we may act for our own benefit. Giving itself is something that we need to do in order to grow and become bigger people. However, the highest form of kindness is when we give out of a sense of humility, putting the needs and wishes of others ahead of our own.

Perhaps this insight is the message of a surprising line in the Midrash.¹² The Midrash describes the experience of the moment of death and lists several questions which the Angel of Death inquires of the dying person. The answers to these questions impact the harshness of the soul’s passage.

Have you involved yourself in the study of Torah and acts of kindness?

Did you accept your Creator as King, morning and evening?¹³

Did you accept your friend as a king, with a pleasant demeanor?

This last question is certainly unexpected and its meaning is a bit elusive. Apparently there is a parallel between the nature of our relationship with G-d and the way we relate to others. How can this be?

Our ability to accept G-d as King comes from a sense of humility, an awareness of the reality that we are totally dependant on our Creator. Without this sense of humility our personal world becomes self-centered, instead of being focused on serving and growing closer to G-d. This same self-centered existence interferes with our desire to give, and taints the purity of the acts of kindness that we do perform.

The final question of the Angel of Death suggests that it is not enough just to be involved in acts of kindness, the subject of his first question. We need also to develop an attitude and an approach in our dealings with others—to treat them as our superiors, to see in them the image of G-d, in which they were

created, and not to regard them simply as competitors in some great race of self-centered attainment.

In a practical sense, humbling ourselves in this way will bring us to a better sense of our own true selves. After all, we are all created in the image of G-d, but seeing that in others first can help us make this concept a reality for ourselves, and prepare us to accept the obligations which it demands. Ultimately, this brings us closer to G-d and to accepting Him as our King.

We now have a deeper insight into the great hope offered by Rabbi Yochanon ben Zakai, that the cleansing power inherent in the performance of acts of kindness is equal to the service in the Temple. Like the Temple, kindness, when done properly, brings us closer to G-d and returns our world to its proper balance and purpose. This is what brings true forgiveness.¹⁴

The truth is that every act of kindness, for whatever motivation, has the power to at least start us towards this goal. We should seek out every opportunity that is available to us, to give and forgive as much as we can, growing closer to G-d in the process. Through this may we merit our own forgiveness, a good year, and the rebuilding of the Temple. 🕊️

¹² *Otzar Midrashim*, p.84

¹³ A reference to the twice-daily recital of the *Shema*, in which we accept the yoke of the Heavenly Kingdom.

¹⁴ In a very broad sense this process shares a parallel with the period of the Days of Awe. We focus on accepting G-d as King on Rosh Hashanah and we hope that through this we will merit forgiveness on Yom Kippur.