



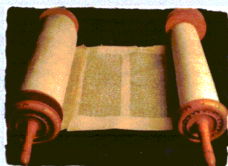
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The Lubavitcher Rebbe

Parshas
Vayelech

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LIVING WITH THE TIMES

Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, is a day that is entirely dedicated to returning to G-d in teshuva (repentance). Among the many mitzvot involved in teshuva is the act of confession, as the Torah states, "You shall confess your sin." Indeed, this is the basis for the "Al Cheit" ("For the Sin of...") confessional recited on Yom Kippur, which enumerates the various sins a person may have committed.

In the Jerusalem Talmud, the question of whether or not this generalised confession is sufficient is debated. Rabbi Yehuda Ben Betaira maintains that in addition to reciting "Al Cheit," a detailed admission of personal sins is required. Rabbi Akiva, by contrast, opines that "It is not necessary to go into detail about one's deeds."

But what exactly is the crux of their argument? As Tosefot explains, Rabbi Yehuda's insistence on a detailed account is for the purpose of arousing a deeper sense of remorse. The more a person is ashamed of his misdeeds, the deeper his repentance will be. Rabbi Akiva, however, takes the human factor into consideration, and asserts that if a person's individualised confession is overheard by others, "he might be suspected of other sins as well." In other words, the way people think about him might be negatively affected.

In essence, the argument revolves around where the emphasis should be placed: on the present, or on the future. When the present is emphasised - the fact that today is Yom Kippur - it is preferable to enumerate one's sins in order to achieve a higher level of teshuva. When the stress is on the future, the determining factor is to avoid any possible negative repercussions.

On a deeper level, there is another basis for their disagreement. Rabbi Yehuda views the individual in his present state, as one who is just beginning to do teshuva and draw closer to G-d. There are two basic motivations for doing teshuva: an initial stage, in which a person repents out of a sense of fear, and a higher level, on which the motivation is love for G-d. When a person enumerates his every little sin, it produces in him a stronger feeling of fear and awe of G-d.

Rabbi Akiva, however, looks at the larger picture, and anticipates that the person will eventually reach the higher level. In fact, his entire approach is to always perceive the hidden good in everything. When a person repents out of love for G-d, it makes no difference whether the sin is great or small; for he knows that every sin creates a distance between himself and G-d, and he will avoid committing even the smallest transgression.

Adapted from Volume 24 of Likutei Sichot

MORAL IS NORMAL

by Yossy Goldman

If anyone was bent on convincing us that Torah was old-fashioned, the Yom Kippur afternoon reading would be a good way to prove it. Leviticus, Chapter 18, contains the Bible's Immorality Act. Our moral code, the forbidden relationships, who may marry whom and who may not—all come from this week's reading.

Every year in every synagogue around the world someone asks the very same question. "Why on Yom Kippur, Rabbi? Was there no other section of the Torah to choose besides the one about illicit sex? Is this an appropriate choice to read in Shul on the holiest day of the year?"

Fair question. So the Rabbis explain that this is, in fact, the ultimate test of our holiness. The most challenging arena of human conduct, the one that really tests the mettle of our morality, is not how we behave in the synagogue but how we behave in our bedrooms. To conduct ourselves appropriately in public is far easier than to be morally consistent in our intimate lives.

Old-fashioned? You bet. In a world of ever-changing, relative morality where gay marriages and starving people to death have become acceptable, the Torah does indeed seem rather antiquated.

Man-made laws are forever being amended to suit changing times and circumstances. When a new super-highway is built, traffic officials may decide that it is safe to raise the speed limit. Should there be a fuel shortage, these same officials may decide to lower the speed limit in order to conserve the energy supply. Human legislation is constantly adapting to fluctuating realities. But G-d's laws are constant, consistent and eternal. Divine legislation governs moral issues. Values, ethics, right and wrong, these are eternal, never-changing issues. Humankind has been confronting these problems since time immemorial. From cavemen to Attila the Hun to nuclear superpowers, the essential issues really have not changed very much. Questions of moral principle, good and evil, have been there from the very beginning. Life choices are made by each of us in every generation. These questions are timeless.

So we read that adultery was forbidden in Moses' day and it still is in ours. So is incest. But it wouldn't shock me at all if the same forces motivating for new sexual freedoms soon began campaigning for incestuous relationships to become legal. And why not? If it's all about consenting adults, why deny siblings? Given the slippery slope of our moral mountains, nothing is unthinkable any more.

Ultimately, morality cannot be decided by referendum. We desperately need a higher authority to guide us in the often confusing dilemmas of life. In Egypt and Canaan lots of degenerate behaviour was acceptable, even popular. In this week's Parshah, G-d tells His people that He expects us to march to a different beat. We are called upon to be a holy nation, distinctively different in this, the most challenging test of our morality. It doesn't matter what is legal or trendy in Egypt, Canaan, America or Scandinavia. We have our own moral guide, our own book of books which requires no editing or revised editions for the new age. Because right is right and wrong is wrong and so it will always be.

A wise rabbi once wrote that we mustn't confuse "normal" with "average." Since there are people out there who, tragically, may have lost a leg, this would mean that the "average" person has something like 1.97 legs. But that isn't quite "normal." A normal person has two legs. When Torah teaches us to be holy and distinctive, it is reminding us to be normal, not average. Average can be rather mediocre. Just be normal and retain your Jewish uniqueness. It may not be easy. It may not be politically correct. You probably will not win any popularity contests. But you will be faithful to the eternal truths of life. And in the long run, you will be right.

Rabbi Yossy Goldman was sent by the Rebbe to South Africa in 1976, where he was founding director of the country's first Chabad House. In 1986, with the Rebbe's guidance, he accepted the invitation to become the rabbi of the iconic Sydenham Shul, where he is now Life Rabbi Emeritus. He is also president of the South African Rabbinical Association and often represents the Jewish faith on South African radio and television.

His first book, *From Where I Stand*, was published by KTAV in 2012 and has since been reprinted. His sermons have been translated into Hebrew, Spanish, Russian and German, among other languages.



Slice of LIFE

Kol Nidrei in the Forest

Days and months passed in the muddy trenches of the battlefield. Zalman Bronshtein lay motionless, rifle cocked against the German enemy only hundreds of feet away. He thought about his wife and three children. The thought of his family gave him the strength to survive the horrors of war.

For a year, a bloody war waged between Russian forces and the German enemy. Tens of thousands of young people had already paid with their lives. And there was no end to the fighting in sight.

His shift over, Zalman crept carefully to the bunker. Once inside, he lay down and tried to get some sleep before being sent back to his post.

Unexpectedly, a high ranking officer entered the bunker. He began to shave, all the while singing a song. Zalman opened his eyes. Why had the officer decided to shave in the bunker of the lower ranks, Zalman wondered. However, what bothered him even more was that the officer was singing the song all wrong! Zalman could not resist, and he called out to the officer, "Comrade Officer, the original song is sung a little differently..."

The officer turned to him in surprise. "You know the song? If yes, you must sing it!" Zalman was hardly in the mood to sing. Nor did he have the strength for such pursuits. Try as he might, his excuses were ineffective. And so, he sang the joyous song as the officer listened with evident pleasure.

When finished, the officer began to grumble about the Russian army. "How can they send a gifted singer to the front lines? It's wrong, it's immoral! Today I will bring up the matter at headquarters!"

Weeks went by. Zalman's routine continued as before and he forgot about the officer and his offer. He was preoccupied with fighting, fire bombs and mortal danger. More than once Zalman was sure that he owed his life to a miracle. Whenever he was on the front-lines, he always had the image of his Rebbe, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn of Lubavitch, before his

eyes. And he felt confident, knowing that the Rebbe was praying for him.

One day a message came over the radio. "Who is the singer Bronstein?" He appeared before the bunker officer immediately, who told him, "I was ordered to send you to Headquarters. Take your things and head there immediately. But be careful! Any wrong move could be fatal."

With his heart full of fear, Zalman made his way to Headquarters. Only when he was transferred to the officers in charge of the military choir did he remember the officer whom he had sung for a few weeks earlier.

He was asked to sing for a group of senior commanders. Zalman knew that if he was successful in impressing the commanders, he could be relieved of his position as a soldier on the front lines. He began to sing the Russian song again, this time with more emotion.

The officers were beside themselves with admiration. They began to argue over who would have Zalman with their company. His singing would surely raise the morale of the soldiers. Finally it was decided that he would rotate, performing in front of many different military companies.

Zalman moved from base to base. Commanders and officers were now his close comrades; he was a source of pride for Jewish soldiers. During one concert he even got a note from a Jewish officer with a request for "something in Yiddish." He did indeed sing a Yiddish song that was well received and that reminded the Jewish soldiers of their homes and families.

A date was set for an important performance. It would be in front of hundreds of military doctors. Zalman was shocked when he realised that the date chosen was the day of Yom Kippur. Zalman was determined that he would not participate or perform on the holiest day of the year.

On the morning of Yom Kippur, Zalman notified the music director that he was not well. He had severe pain in the head and throat and he would not be able to sing that day. The director tried to pressure him but in vain. There was no choice and the show went on without him.

Zalman sat in his room, absorbed in

the prayers of the day of Yom Kippur, from what he remembered by heart. After praying he began reciting psalms. There was singing in the background and the military band could be heard performing.

Suddenly there was a loud knock on the door and three military officers entered. "Are you Bronstein the singer?" they asked and immediately continued, "Do you know what today is?" Zalman was scared but he braced himself and answered confidently, "Yes, today is Yom Kippur."

Their faces softened and a quiet plea was heard from them. "We are Jews. Could you sing for us some excerpts from the prayers of today's holy day?"

Zalman explained, "How can I sing? I officially notified them I'm not well and unable to sing!"

The officers had an idea. They would go with him behind the camp where there was a dense forest. There, in the forest, he would be able to sing the prayers without anyone hearing.

Zalman felt their excitement, and realised how anxious they were to recall their parents' homes and the yearning for the Jewish life they had experienced in their childhood.

There, in the forest, behind the thick curtain of trees, Zalman stood facing the three officers. He closed his eyes and began to chant the prayer of the Kol Nidrei with its traditional tune. He ended Kol Nidrei and continued to the Unsanah Token.

In the midst of this terrible war, the future outcome of which remained unknown, three Jewish souls stood in the forest with the spark of the Jewish soul burning with the fire of this holy and awesome day.

Zalman finished with a final prayer: "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God... He is our Saviour and He will redeem us."

Zalman opened his eyes to a sight that he would never forget: three officers with their eyes closed weeping like babies. "Now I understand," he thought to himself, "the Divine Providence in sending that officer into my bunker that morning singing a song."

After the war, Rabbi Zalman Bronshtein immigrated to Israel where he was a founding member of Kfar Chabad. During the High Holidays he served as the cantor in the village's main synagogue.

Translated from Sichat HaShavua



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