

Yom Kippur Ne'ilah: The Final Moments

Dr. Chana Ringel

Seats in the shul are filled, faces hidden behind prayer books, tears streaming down cheeks - a palpable urgency and energy is in the air. The last moments of Yom Kippur are met with our deepest emotions and aspirations, as it seems we can let nothing stand in the way of our *tefillot* and the open heavens.

The Magid of Lublin compares these moments to a hunter who has lost his way in the forest. Upon hearing a noise in the distance, fearing it may be a lion or other wild animal, he quickly shoots an arrow toward the sound, only to find a dry bush. Soon after he sees movement and shoots again, only to find his target to be some leaves rustling in the wind. Moments later, he is left with one arrow and indeed he recognizes the movement, shape and roar of a lion. The focus, intention and attention with which he sets up this last shot, knowing it is his last arrow and it is indeed one which holds in it a story of life or death. So too, we stand at the end of this forty-day period that began with the advent of the month of Elul. We have shot many arrows, with prayers, supplications, charity and being extra careful in our observances - this however is our last arrow of the night, and we do indeed put all our focus and attention into making the shot. This popular approach to Ne'ilah, the final moments before the special opportunities available on Yom Kippur end and the heavenly gates close, is one that resonates with us all.

If you would open your minds and your hearts to exploring with me another perspective to these last few moments of this holy day. After the silent *amidah* (Shemoneh Esrei) and its repetition by the *chazzan* - we have a sort of conclusive ceremony. First, we recite in unison the verse of the Shema. Then we say aloud, three times, the phrase that we are only able to whisper all year long, that of *ברוך שם כבוד ועד מלכותו לעולם ועד*, *Blessed is the Name of the Glory of His Kingdom forever and ever*, and finally we declare *ה' הוא האלוקים*, *Hashem, is the true G-d - seven times*. The Kaddish is then recited and we blow the shofar and proclaim *לשנה הבאה בירושלים*, *Next year in Jerusalem*.

Why this closing ceremony?

Ne'ilah - a Prayer of Transition

We have learned that on Yom Kippur we are elevated to the level of *malachim*, of angels, in some respect. We abstain from eating and drinking, and immerse ourselves in prayer and connecting with G-d. The Talmud tells us that we appear "before Hashem" and emerge from the day with atonement and in a purified and cleansed state. Ne'ilah is not only the closing of the Yom Kippur day, it is also the transition back into "humanity" from the elevated "angelic state."

Rav Volbe explains that when a spaceship re-enters the atmosphere it must be done at a very specific angle, or it will implode and self-destruct, losing its crew and all of the information gleaned from outer space. He explains that at the closing of Yom Kippur, we too must re-enter the mundane world at a precise angle and in a specific way to ensure that we can maintain and implement the *kedusha* (inspiration and sanctity) that we have acquired over Yom Kippur and the preceding 40 days of growth.

Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch notes the Ne'ilah prayer is a recap of the Yom Kippur prayer service and is a message to take with us to serve Hashem in our day to day living.

The stages of transition:**Shema Yisrael**

In unison we recite the verse : *Shema Yisrael Hashem Elokeynu*, Hear O Israel, Hashem, our G-d, Hashem is ONE:

- It is our pledge of allegiance, of loyalty and commitment to the service of Hashem.
- It is our mission statement - in accepting upon ourselves the heavenly yoke, incumbent upon every Jewish man and woman.
- It is a universal truth - of the singularity of our G-d in the universe.

We refer to both Hashem, the tetragrammaton which is noted to refer to the merciful aspect of G-d, as well as to the name *Elokim*, referring to the aspect of Judgement, and we declare - *echad* - they are one. This is especially powerful after a year like this past one!

Baruch shem kevod malchuto le'olam va'ed

We recite the phrase *Baruch Shem Kevod*, Blessed is the name of His glorious kingdom forever and ever, three times.

Since we were young, we have been taught to whisper these words, as they belong to the angels. But on Yom Kippur when we are elevated to angelic levels in some ways we are able to say them aloud.

Let us go back to the original utterance of this phrase:

The Midrash in Devarim Rabba tells the story of Moshe ascending to the heavens after the initial events at Har Sinai (when the Jewish People proclaimed their complete devotion to fulfil G-d's word and said - "*Na'aseh venishma* - We will do and we will listen/understand").

While in the heavens, Moshe hearing the angels saying *Baruch shem kevod*, brings these words back to the people. The Midrash describes this phrase that Moshe has brought down with him as a stolen jewel from a palace that should not be worn in public.

Why?

A Midrash in Yechezkel explains the origin of this phrase explaining that it refers to the angelic response when the Jewish people stand true to their mission in the world. The verse in Yechezkel (1:24) states:

תִּרְפְּיָנָה כִּנְפֵיהֶן בְּעֹמְדָם, *when they stand, they let down their wings.*

When who stands? It cannot be referring to the angels, as they are continually "standing." The Midrash Yalkut Shimoni comments that it is impossible for angels to sit, and this phrase must be read differently. "When THEY stand," then, must be referring to when the Jewish people stand (and not the angels). "THEY let down their wings," the wings of the angels are lowered, in a sense, they are silenced. How so? When we declare the Shema accepting the Heavenly Yoke and committing our lives to the words of the

Torah through our free choice and moral freedoms, then the angels respond in admission with this very phrase "*Baruch shem kevod.*" The angels are, in a sense, silenced (as they lower their wings) when we, as humans, dedicate ourselves to the service of Hashem through our free choice as they recognize that they, lacking free choice, cannot attain that level.

The angels recognize that *Malchut Hashem* - G-d's Dominion and Kingdom will ultimately and ideally be recognized in the realm of man and not in the heavenly spheres where they stand tall, but cannot serve Hashem through choice. Mankind fulfilling Divine Will, leads the world to its ultimate purpose, surpassing the level of angels submitting to the Divine Will, as humans serve Hashem by choice while angels lack free choice.

When Moshe brought the phrase *Baruch Shem kevod* down from Heaven, it accurately described our state of being. Having just committed to G-d with the words *na'aseh venishma*, we made the choice to commit to filling the world with the greatest display of Hashem's Kingdom, by fulfilling His Will, The Torah. When Moshe descended to find the Golden Calf, we chose otherwise, and had fallen from the heights of performing Divine Will at that level and lost our rights to utilize the phrase *Baruch Shem kevod*.

Yom Kippur is the appropriate day to highlight this message. It is a supernatural day, highlighting the possibility and accessibility of *teshuvah*. Repentance is also a function of "choice," unique to mankind. After all, our choices create our reality. And think of how many choices, large and small we make each day. Each choice is an opportunity. And *teshuvah*, repentance, is the ability to create a new reality by choosing differently with regards to the past and dissociating oneself from sin, even after the fact. *Teshuvah* too is a function of choice!

We declare aloud *Baruch Shem kevod* three times on Yom Kippur to declare G-d's Kingdom in the present, past and future. This too can be related to the phrase *Baruch Shem*. We stood worthy of the angelic recognition at Har Sinai when we received the Torah, and we stand worthy on Yom Kippur when we abstain from earthly pleasures and immerse ourselves in closeness to G-d as we attain an "angelic" state.

We conclude the day believing that we will again, one day, reach that place where through our choices enable consistent and ultimate realization of the Godly Kingdom in the world. The angels will join as they did in the Midrash in recognizing that it is through our choices and actions, and not by abstaining, that we can bring the greatest glory to G-d in the world.

Each Yom Kippur as we take advantage of our spiritual opportunities, we move one step closer to reaching this goal.

Hashem Hu Ha'elokim

Finally - we say the powerful words *Hashem Hu Ha'Elokim* seven times.

Why seven times? Commentaries explain this represents the escorting Hashem back through the seven heavens He had descended from when He came to meet us during this Yemei Ratzon period. Seven times we declare Hashem is the true G-d. Seven heavens. Seven is a powerful number in Judaism.

Where is this phrase from? It originates in Melachim I Chapter 18 with Eliyahu at Har HaCarmel (*Carmel Mountain*). There is a big showdown between the false prophets of the Ba'al (idolatry) and Eliyahu Hanavi who implores the Jewish people to choose between G-d or the Ba'al and to stop swinging between the two. Eliyahu cries out in verse 21 "If Hashem is the G-d, go after Him, and if the Ba'al, go after him."

What does the nation answer? The verse continues:

דבר ולא ענו העם אותו דבר, *and they did not answer him anything*. There was an awkward silence. Rashi explains: שלא היו יודעים להבחין, *for they did not know how to differentiate*. They could not make choices, because they did not know how to tell the difference between the truth and falsehood, between good and bad. How often do we slip up to a point where we cannot even tell that we are doing something wrong?

Eliyahu asks and G-d performs an open miracle - a flash revelation. The Jews are able to see clearly and differentiate at that moment and choose G-d declaring *Hashem Hu HaElokim* twice. Within just a few verses, sadly they were unable to maintain that closeness to Hashem and falter – the change didn't last.

How then is our Yom Kippur proclamation different? The Jews in the time of Eliyahu chose Hashem in response to an open miracle but did not put in the effort to learn how to differentiate. They chose without investing. When we show up at the conclusion of Yom Kippur we too are choosing, but hope and pray that after 40 days of hard work, introspection, investment and commitment we will be able to sustain a closeness and relationship that we sought out with G-d. We hope it will be a lasting guide to all our choices through the year.

It is interesting to note that once again, as in Shema, we find the two names of G-d used here. The Tetragrammon, Hashem, which represents the aspect of G-d that we experience as *rachamim* or Mercy and the name *Elokim*, which represents the aspect of G-d that we experience as Judgement. At the conclusion of Yom Kippur as we prepare to re-enter the world, we recognize and rejoice that Hashem and *Elokim* are one.

Next year in Yerushalayim

Finally, we then blow the shofar and sing aloud our hope and prayer to be in a rebuilt Jerusalem in the coming year, לשנה הבאה בירושלים. We have been painfully reminded, that while the gates to heaven will be open to us this year, the gates to Yerushalayim may be closed to many of us. This year, more than ever, we have a responsibility to see these words as a possible reality - but only if we so choose.

What better way to conclude our Yom Kippur and transition back into "day to day reality" than to pronounce our belief in Hashem and our commitment to the Torah and restate our belief in ourselves and our ability to be the true subjects of the angelic phrase. It is precisely in our humanity that we bring the greatest glory to G-d's kingdom.