

Yom Kippur: Torah Reading – Vayikra

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The Torah reading for Yom Kippur morning, quite appropriately, describes the service performed on this day by the Kohen Gadol (High Priest) in the Beit Hamikdash (Holy Temple) in Jerusalem. I chose this topic because many times I find myself not concentrating on the Torah reading and I thought that if there were some powerful message that we can learn from this reading, I wanted to bring it to life and share.

I want to set the stage with a powerful story about the holy and beloved Chassidic Rabbi, Reb Levi Yitzchok from Berditchev as told by Rabbi Yaakov Yosef Reinman.¹ In Berditchev, located in the Ukraine, there lived a drunk man known as Yankel the Gambler. Yankel was an innkeeper who neglected his inn and wasted most of his time playing cards. His observance of the Torah was practically non-existent. Yet, Rav Levi Yitzchak never despaired of bringing Yankel back to his roots; back to a Torah-observant life. He always spoke to him warmly and with encouragement.

One day, Rav Levi Yitzchok passed Yankel playing cards in the street with some of his friends. “Yankel,” said Rav Levi Yitzchok, “I envy you.” “You envy me? Why,” replied Yankel. Rav Levi Yitzchok responded, “Our Sages say that when a person does *teshuvah* and repents all his sins are transformed into merits. You have such a large accumulation of sins, Yankel, that when you finally decide to repent, you will have a vast storehouse of merit.”

Yankel smiled and said, “Rebbe, I have a secret for you; Next year you are going to envy me even more than you envy me now, because by then I

will have a much larger accumulation of potential merits.”

Rav Levi Yitzchok chuckled and continued on his way. And from that day on, for several years, Rav Levi Yitzchok and Yankel would have a similar conversation.

One day, Yankel’s wife came knocking on Rav Levi Yitzchak’s door, “Rebbe, my husband is deathly ill. The doctors think he is going to die. Please come help him.”

Rav Levi Yitzchok rushed to Yankel’s bedside at the inn and found him indeed close to death. “So, Yankel,” the Rav said, “We’ve been having this conversation for years. You always said I would envy you more and more with each passing day. Should I envy you now?”

Yankel coughed and smiled. “I’ll answer your question, Rebbe. When I rented this inn from the local squire, it was a fine building in excellent shape. But I neglected it. I was too busy drinking and playing cards.” And so, the building fell into ruin. The paint peeled; the roof leaked. The walls cracked. One day, the squire came to visit during a torrential downpour. “What have you done, Yankel,” he exclaimed, “I trusted you with a fine inn and look what a ruin you have made of it! That is my answer to you, Rebbe.” Yankel burst into tears and his soul departed his body. Rav Levi Yitzchok said, “Yankel has repented and returned his soul to its Maker in purity. He has repaired the inn that was entrusted to him.”

Teshuvah, repentance is simple. It is true regret, sincere regret, telling Hashem I am truly sorry for what I have done. And that is the theme of this

¹ ArtScroll Series, *Rav Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev*, by Rabbi Yaakov Yosef Reinman, Copyright 2011 by Mesorah Publications, Ltd.

Yom Kippur reading – repentance and forgiveness.

The Torah portion that is read during the morning services of Yom Kippur is found in *Parshat Acharei Mot* – which means after they died. Who died? Two sons of Aharon Hakohen– Naadav and Avihu.

The Torah introduces the Yom Kippur service by telling us that G-d spoke to Moshe after the death of Aharon's two sons, which implies that there was a connection between this sad event and the Yom Kippur service. What is the connection? The Yerushalmi Yoma gives us an explanation - just as Yom Kippur brings atonement, so the death of a Tzaddik, a righteous person, brings atonement. The *Meshech Chochma* explains that Yom Kippur is an *eit ratzon* – a time of favor and is thus an opportune time for atonement.

The Torah reading continues with Hashem explaining to Moshe the special services to be performed by the High Priest in the Beit Hamikdash, the Holy Temple, on Yom Kippur. Hashem said to Moshe, "Speak to Aharon your brother and let him know that he may not come at all times into the Sanctuary within the curtain in front of the cover that is upon the Ark – meaning the Holy of Holies – so that he should not die, for in a cloud will I appear upon the cover." Having stated the prohibition against entering the Holy of Holies, the Torah now tells us the procedure the High Priest must follow when he is permitted to enter. Says the Torah, "Only with this may Aharon come into the Holy of Holies with a young bull for a sin offering and a ram for an elevation offering."

The Torah then tells us what type of garments the High Priest must wear when entering the Holy of Holies, the place that only the High Priest entered once a year – which was on Yom Kippur. The High Priest was usually distinguished from an ordinary priest by the eight garments he wore, four of which were golden. On Yom Kippur, however, the High Priest removed the four golden garments each time before he

entered the Holy of Holies. While in the Holy of Holies, the High Priest was only allowed to wear white linen garments – he was not permitted to wear the garments which had gold in them. Why not? From here we learn a very famous concept brought by Rashi -- *ein kateigor na'aseh saneigor*, a prosecutor does not become a defense counselor. The gold in the garments suggests the sin of the Golden Calf – the grave sin committed by the Jewish people forty days after they had received the Torah on Mount Sinai. For this same reason, many women do not wear gold jewelry on Yom Kippur. The gold acts as a prosecutor and speaks against the Jewish people. Thus, the High Priest should not be wearing anything with gold when he performs the special Yom Kippur service within the Holy of Holies, for this service is meant to defend the Jewish people and gain them forgiveness.

We find what appears to be a glaring contradiction. The Torah tells Aharon that he should come into the sanctuary with a *par ben bakar*, a young bull, for a sin offering. A young bull is a calf! How is it that the Torah states that the High Priest cannot wear garments with gold in it because gold suggests the sin of the Golden Calf – what about bringing a calf? That certainly appears to be a stark reminder of this sin - does not the young bull also suggest the Sin of the Golden Calf? How are we to understand this? What is the difference between gold which the Kohen Gadol could not wear on Yom Kippur in the Holy of Holies and a calf? They were both used in the Sin of the Golden Calf.

My son offered a beautiful explanation which he saw in the *piyyutim*, the poetry that is read during the *chazzan's* repetition on the second day of Pesach. In describing how Hashem publicly displayed His love for the Jewish people, the poet said, "You, Hashem publicly displayed our love for them; by causing the idolatrous bull to be replaced with the sacrificial bull and by exalting the bull offering above all other offerings, You removed the stain of their sins...." --- and the poem continues in this vein.

What can we learn from this? Gold is a metal, it is inanimate, it is lifeless – once it was used for something negative or bad, here for idolatry, it cannot be changed. It cannot now be used to defend the Jewish people from prosecution.

However, a cow or a bull is a living thing, it can change. Just because it was used for something negative or bad, doesn't mean it cannot be changed and be used for something good. In fact, Hashem had Aharon bring a cow as a sin offering to show that Hashem forgave Aharon and the Jewish people for the grave sin of the Golden Calf.

As set forth so beautifully in the *piyyut* I just shared, Hashem exalted the bull offering above all offerings – it is the choicest highest level sacrifice. Why? Because the gravest sin committed by the Jewish people was the sin of the Golden Calf (which is a cow). Hashem wanted to show his Jewish children that he forgave them. Precisely the same animal – the cow – which is a living thing, which was used for bad is now being used for good. The cow is a living thing; it is not inanimate and therefore is capable of change.

Human beings are living things, so even more so a human being can change. Of course, a human being is more elevated than an animal; a human being can think and speak and is connected to Hashem. This is precisely what *teshuvah* (repentance) is about. Just because I used my body to do something I should not have done, I sinned, I spoke *lashon hara*, I did something Hashem did not want me to do, does not mean I cannot repent, that I cannot change and do something good. This is the essence of Yom Kippur - Yom Kippur is about repenting, atonement, changing my ways to do better, to follow the Torah and Mitzvot; and Hashem is ready to forgive.

Teshuvah can be done in a second, in a moment. A person can change his or her trajectory, his or her direction in an instant. Hashem wants to see that you really mean it – you really want to change and then Hashem helps you on your

journey. Hashem forgives. It's the message of Yankel the innkeeper, it's the message of Yom Kippur day.

Wishing you all a K'tiva v'chatima tova!