

Yom Kippur Ne'ilah Part 1

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We are about to acknowledge how worthless we are. After the abbreviated *vidui*, confession, in our *amidah*, silent prayer for Ne'ilah, we will recite:

What are we? What are our lives? What is our kindness? What is our righteousness? What is our salvation? What is our power? What is our strength?

מה אנו, מה חיינו, מה
חסדנו, מה צדקותינו,
מה ישועתנו, מה
לחנו, מה גבורתנו

When we compare ourselves to the Almighty, it is impossible to claim any self-worth:

What can we say before You, Hashem our G-d and the G-d of our fathers? Is it not the case that all strong ones are like nothing before you, people of repute as if they never were, the wise as if they have no knowledge, the discerning as if lacking in intelligence, because most of their deeds are empty, and the days of their lives are worthless before you, and there is no advantage to humanity over animals because all is worthless.

מה נאמר לפניך ה'
אלקינו ואלקי
אבותינו, הלא כל
הגבורים כאין לפניך,
ואנשי השם כלא היו,
וחכמים כבלי מדע,
ונבונים כבלי השכל,
כי רב מעשיהם תהו,
וימי חייהם הבל
לפניך, ומותר האדם
מן הבהמה אין, כי
הכל הבל

Needless to say, this bitter sentiment is not very motivating. If all is worthless, what have we been doing for the past 24 hours? What was the point of the last ten days? Of the month of Elul before that?

Fortunately, our *tefillah* continues with a follow-up paragraph beginning with the words:

You distinguished the human being from the beginning, and You recognized him to stand before You.

אתה הבדלת אנוש
מראש, ותכירהו
לעמוד לפניך

When compared with Hashem, it is clear that we have no independent value, yet He chose to invest us with value. What does this mean? How are we to understand this value? And if in fact, Hashem has made us so valuable, why state that we are worthless?

In his book, *ימי זכרון*, Rav Soloveitchik explains that the value of a human being stems from the concept of שליחות. שליחות is a halakhic concept by which someone can designate another as a proxy, as a messenger and we deem this proxy as a stand-in for the one who sent him: "שלוחו של אדם כמותו."

Rav Soloveitchik suggests that every human being is a messenger of G-d, our self-worth derives from the Divine choice to give us a mission to fulfill in the world. Because we have a G-d-given mission in the world we are "כמותו", we are G-d-like, בצלם אלקים.

According to the Rav, the time, place and circumstances of the birth of each individual are not coincidental. Divine Providence determines the exact conditions which will give each individual her or his ability to carry out this Divine mission.

In this way, we are all like Moshe Rabbeinu, sent by Hashem to accomplish something of significance in this world. With the important difference that Hashem does not tell us directly

what it is that we are meant to do. Part of the job is figuring that out.

The Rav cites Rav Kook's interpretation of the *tefillah* we say immediately following the *vidui*, the confession we repeat throughout Yom Kippur. We begin with:

Before I was formed, I | אלקי עד שלא נוצרתי
was unworthy. | איני כדאי

According to Rav Kook this refers to all the previous time periods during which I was not alive. I was not meant to be alive at those times because I would not have been able to fulfill my שליחות, my mission from Hashem. Until, finally, the generation meant for me arrived, giving me the potential to be G-d's messenger. But alas, "ועכשו שנוצרתני", *now that I have been created and given this opportunity*, "כְּאֵלוֹ לֹא נֹצַרְתִּי", *it's as if I was not created*, because I have not fulfilled this potential, I have not achieved what G-d intended for me.

Our self-worth stems from our potential to fulfill G-d's will and we are held accountable for this expectation on Yom Kippur. The past forty days were set aside for soul-searching. What is our mission? What does Hashem expect from us? What is our spiritual potential and what are we doing to reach it? The tricky thing about potential is that involves trial and error. A runner never knows his top speed without trying to run faster. It is only through pushing ourselves that we are able to discover what our potential truly is.

When we say Ne'ilah at the end of this process of self-reflection, we appeal to Divine mercy to give us another chance, with resolve to improve, to work harder, to do better in the year to come. The *Mishnah Berurah* comments in the section of the *Shulchan Aruch* regarding Ne'ilah (או"ח (תרכג:ב, ס"ק ג):

And one should pray with much alacrity because the culmination of all of the ten days of repentance is Yom Kippur, and the culmination of Yom Kippur is the Ne'ilah service, because all is determined by the sealing and if not now, when?!

And therefore, even if one is weak from fasting, one should nonetheless gird his loins like a warrior to pray with clear, pure thoughts and to truly accept on oneself the vows of repentance, and one who is looking to be purified will be supported and be sealed in the book of good life.

ויזדרז מאד בתפלה זו כי תכלית כל העשרת ימי תשובה הוא יום הכפור ותכלית יום הכפור הוא תפילת נעילה שהכל הולך אחת החיתום, ואם לא עכשו אימתי

ולכן אף אם חלש הוא מחמת התענית מכל מקום יאזור כגבור חלציו להתפלל במחשבה זכה וברורה ולקבל על עצמו נדרי התשובה באמת, והבא לטהר מסייעין אותו ויחתם בספר חיים טובים"

As we enter Yom Kippur for this final push, let us appreciate the opportunity Hashem has given us to obtain forgiveness, to start out with a clean slate, so that we can re-connect with our ultimate purpose and continue striving to reach the great potential expected of us.

G'mar Chatimah Tova!