

Yom Kippur
10 Tishrei 5765/September 25, 2004

According to rabbinic tradition, it was on Yom Kippur of the first year after the Exodus that Moshe came down the mountain with the second tablets of the Law, as a confirmation that G-d had accepted His people's pleas for forgiveness. It is not possible from the text of the Torah to establish an absolute chronology of the events surrounding the Golden Calf but I would like to make three observations about this incident for us this Yom Kippur morning and I will be drawing my material from the Torah passages which deal with both the incident of the Golden Calf (Exodus chapters 32-34) and the Avodah, or annual Yom Kippur service (Leviticus chapter 16)

Let's begin. In Exodus 32 we read that the L-rd dealt with guilty ones who had made the golden calf, FIRST through the house of Levi who fought and struck down three thousand leaders of the revolt and NEXT by an unspecified plague which came upon the other perpetrators among the people. There is no way to escape the judgment of G-d, our only chance is submit ourselves to it and plead for His great mercy. And His mercy is only available for those whose asking for forgiveness involves making a commitment to walk in obedience, separate from their sins. There are three principles of discipleship which the L-rd has always called His people to, to the Jew first and also to the Gentile. They are: mercy, judgment and righteousness.

Both Jer. 9:23, 24 and Micah 6:8 mention these three aspects of walking with G-d. In Jeremiah it is kindness or mercy (Chesed), righteousness (Mishpat) and judgment (Tzedakah) and in Micah it is to act justly, or righteously (Mishpat), to love mercy (Chesed) and walk humbly (in obedience to Tzedakah, assumed) with G-d. His judgment (Mishpat) sets us apart and outlines His requirements for us as disciples. His mercy (Chesed) cleanses us, heals us and brings us back to a place of obedience to these same discipleship principles. We are called to humbly integrate His requirements (Tzedakah) into every aspect of our lives as we judge ourselves.

The L-RD dealt with the rebels who refused to repent, both those who lead the uprising and those of their followers who remained hidden, a fifth column, an underground of perpetrators – these were the ones the plague struck down. Yom Kippur gives us a chance to separate ourselves from our own underground perpetrator tendencies and make a double commitment which I see symbolized in a special feature of the Avodah (Service) ceremony in Lev. 16.

The High Priest was to take two he-goats for the atonement offering, instead of a single male goat, which was the usual atonement offering at all other times of the year. One goat was to be slaughtered, as per usual, but the other was to go free. We are to die to sin, like the he-goat which was slaughtered, and yet we are to live, marked with forgiveness, like the scapegoat (emissary). One of the saddest spiritual realities of my life as a believer is that when I gave my heart to the L-rd, it still remained sinful, willful, just like a goat. It needs to die so that I can really learn to live. In this life I will always be a goat, but I can live marked by His forgiveness.

The double goat atonement teaches me both to seek forgiveness, which involves a dying to self and also to learn to live in obedience, as an emissary, marked by forgiveness. Our Messiah offered Himself as the supreme atonement offering and in His resurrection He came back to us as the emissary of G-d's triple discipleship call: to seek mercy, to be judged (set apart) and to learn to walk in obedience, in our Messiah's gentle yoke, marked by the blood which He shed for us on the cross.

You see, there is a final cosmic day of G-d's vengeance which is coming on all the generations, and nations of mankind. At Yom Kippur, we get to experience, symbolically, a mini judgment day, so that when we stand before Him on that Great Judgment Day, we will not be condemned with the world, which is what Paul is talking about in I Cor. 11:31, 32. Where do you stand this morning? Have you been judged, or will you be judged with the world? Have you destroyed all your golden calves? Or have they merely gone into hiding in the depths of your heart? At Yom Kippur we are making a commitment be judged, forgiven and to walk in obedience.

Once the L-rd fully dealt with the rebellion of the golden calf, He was ready to allow the people to repair the damage which their rebellion had caused and get ready for the next stage of their spiritual pilgrimage. This is also the kind of commitment we need to make on Yom Kippur. Are

you ready to deal with any spiritual damage you have incurred over the last year, and move on to the next stage of your spiritual pilgrimage in the L-RD? Let's look at my second point and the long process of what that repair meant for Israel.

(2) In Exodus, we read that until they had fully dealt with their sin, the L-RD refused to go up to the Promised Land in the midst of the people. For their own protection, as long as they camped around the mountain after Moshe came down the mountain for the second time, the Shekinah, the Divine Presence never came into the camp. Moshe set up a temporary tent of meeting outside the camp and whenever the L-RD descended to speak with Moshe, He surrounded this tent with the pillar of cloud. Moshe and Joshua would go into the cloud and it was there in the tent, outside the camp that Moshe received all the instructions concerning the tabernacle and sacrifices – the entire contents of the book of Leviticus were given from outside the camp. What does that mean for us?

G-d is not prepared to have a relationship with His people, until we finish dealing with our sin. He will still talk to us and we can still gather around whatever temporary tent of meeting He allows us to access, but until the damage is repaired and the tabernacle of our heart is set in order, our spiritual lives will be put on hold. He does not want us to walk as spiritually damaged goods. What things in your spiritual walk do you need to fix, before His presence can dwell in the midst of your heart and life once again? This is the sad and the glad truth of Yom Kippur – you know the good news and the bad news – which one do you want to hear first?

Let's start with the good news. You are forgiven and can be forgiven every time you come to the L-rd with true repentance in your heart. Now the bad news – until you come to the L-rd in true repentance, you cannot be forgiven, and even after you have been forgiven, there needs to be a process of fixing the damage your rebellion caused, before we are ready to move on spiritually. This is the feature of my current situation which gives me the most comfort and causes me the greatest anxiety.

It does not really matter if we have lots of money, or even if we have lots of success in any of the temporal areas of our lives, it is the condition of our spirituality which really matters. In all the turmoil we have suffered over the last two years, G-d has allowed me to use the time to come to terms with some damaged areas of my spirituality which He wants me to deal with until I am able to get them into condition, into shape. This is the comfort, because it is the condition of our spirituality which should always be the true measure of our sense of how well we are doing in this life.

Now let's talk about the part which causes me great anxiety. Maybe the L-rd will bless me and let me move onto greener pastures before I can complete these spiritual repairs to His satisfaction. You see, Israel did not really truly learn their lesson in the time they spent camping round the mountain and there were other rebellions until the L-rd finally refused to take them into the Promised Land and they had to spend the remainder of their lives in the wilderness.

I do not want to spend my life in a spiritual wilderness and I do not want to let those damaged areas of my spirituality to cause my heart and my life to keep on rebelling against the L-rd, issue by issue, year by year, Yom Kippur by Yom Kippur. I want to move on spiritually, but it's not just my biological clock which I hear ticking. You see, repentance, true repentance has a limited shelf life and at Yom Kippur we need make a commitment to repair all and any spiritual damage which may come into our lives, and to move on before it is too late. Does this mean that there may come a time when it is too late to repent? Yes. What does this spiritual tragedy look like? Sometimes, there may be so much that is going on in our lives, that we may not have either the time or the energy to deal with all the issues of our hearts and lives. And the issues which we could have dealt with and offered to the L-rd as trophies of His grace become part of the baggage which we will see burn before our eyes when, horror of horrors, we stand before the King on that awful final day of His final judgment and all the unresolved issues of our hearts and lives come back to haunt us when we stand before the court where there are no appeals. To avoid this potential tragedy, we need to let the two goat atonement have a very real application to our lives. We need to both die and yet to live, to take up our cross daily, and die daily as we stubbornly deal with the issues of our heart and live lives marked by forgiveness.

What is the mark of this forgiveness? It is threefold and then we will move onto my third point. This mark is Chesed, Mishpat and Tzedakah (mercy, judgment and righteousness). How is your mark doing? Does G-d really have anything to do with your life, or does His presence dwell outside the camp of your heart? Let's look at what happened at the tent Moshe set up outside of the camp after he came down the mountain for the last time with the new tablets of the Law.

(3) Whenever Moshe would come out of the tent, to speak to the people, his face shone with the reflected glory of the presence – isn't it interesting that Joshua's face did not shine. When Moshe finished speaking on the L-RD's behalf, he veiled his face until it was time for him to go back into the temporary tent. This situation continued until the tabernacle was set up and the presence took up permanent residence behind the veil. Once the Tabernacle was set up, Moshe could still go in, but the generational access occurred only once a year, on Yom Kippur. Until that time, the incident with the Golden Calf prevented the people from relating to G-d personally. He refused to have anything more to do with them and anybody who wanted to consult the L-RD, had to leave the camp and listen to this guy with the shining face. How much does G-d really have to do with you personally?

Without this glorious presence, the House of Jacob was not a special people, because it is only the presence of G-d which makes us a special people. In our Messiah, the L-RD wants our faces to shine with the reflected glory of this same presence, but this can only happen if we live in the judgment and forgiveness and obedience of the L-RD. Once a year on Yom Kippur, the L-rd decided whether He was prepared to let His presence continue to dwell in the midst of the people and once a year, the High Priest would go behind the veil with his mini pillar of cloud and renew the covenant.

How about your heart and your life – your camp? Is G-d an outsider with what is going on in the camp of your life? Let's put it another way. If you were being put on trial for being a practicing believer, Jewish or Gentile, would there be enough evidence to convict you? Is all the spiritual activity happening outside the camp of your life? What do you have to do to bring the presence of G-d back into its rightful place at the centre of your heart, as the centre of your life? Not theoretically, not even symbolically, by all the rituals and ceremonies you may perform, but in deed and in truth, really.

With Kol Nidre and the Tashlikh we have asked G-d for a release from our sin and from the failures and unfinished business of the year which is now passed. At the end of the High Holy Days, will you just pick up the sins which you have been released from and merely continue to live in failure and generate some more unfinished business, as if Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur had never really happened? Will you be like the dog which merely returns to what it has vomited, or like the sow which dives back into her mud? Not a very pretty picture, but one that is all too possible.

Instead, will you let the judgment the mercy and the righteousness which G-d is exercising on earth, break the chains of sin in your life? Will you apply the two-goat atonement to your life and learn to live crucified? Will you also continue the process of spiritual repair, until the presence of G-d is no longer outside the camp of your heart, and is right back in the middle where it belongs? Will you allow G-d to reveal and remove all the underground Golden Calf tendencies of your heart – you know the Trojan viruses which build up with every compromise we make, until our lives crash, freeze and burn? Do you want to really deal with the spiritual damage of you heart and life and move on and grow in the purposes of G-d, in His calling in your life? This is the true meaning of Yom Kippur, to the Jew first and also to the Gentile. Let's pray for a year of progress and victory in 5765.