

What did we pray for last Yom Kippur?



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Kol Nidrei 2023. I asked our young congregants at Hampstead Garden Suburb Synagogue what we could do to promote Jewish unity. Looking back at my notes, the issue of unity was the golden thread dominating my three Yom Kippur sermons. Divisiveness within Israel and among global Jewry was the greatest threat to our existence. Months of mass protests, fears of a constitutional crisis, and political unrest were broadcast loudly in Israel and witnessed by the world.

Thirteen days later, we experienced the greatest Jewish tragedy since the Holocaust. Hamas saw this fracturing as a weakness, assuming that Israel would be too divided to respond coherently. They were wrong. In the wake of the tragedy, a profound sense of unity emerged across Israel and Jewish communities worldwide. It felt almost like a divinely ordained correction for our previous divisions.

There is a Sephardi custom of opening the High Holy Days with the 13th-century *piyyut* (liturgical poem) *Achat Ketana* (Little Sister). The 'Little Sister' is the nation of

Israel turning to God in prayer: *"with pleasant words she calls upon You, with song and praises, for such befits You"*



In this beautiful poem, we pray for the conclusion of curses from previous years and the commencement of blessings in the forthcoming year. I have recited this prayer since primary school, but only this year have I come to appreciate why the Little Sister's blessings and curses are intertwined. The ultimate blessing

emerges from the wreckage of the curse.

The weekly portion of Ki Tavo contains one of the most terrifying passages in the Torah, known as the *tochachah* (rebuke). The verses of the *tochachah* contain unfathomable curses. Rabbi Sacks in *Covenant and Conversation* (Ki Tavo, 2008) shares a unique perspective, teaching us about "the principle of the blessing and the curse":

"Now, as then, Jews face enemies outside and tensions within. Now, as then, there have been moments when the people must have come close to despair. Yet one principle has always been engraved on the Jewish heart, allowing it to emerge from tragedy with hope intact. It is the principle of "the blessing and the curse" of which Moses spoke so eloquently. When Jews have suffered, their first reaction is not to blame others but to examine themselves. That is why bad times - the times spoken of in the *tochachah* - have always led to national renewal, and the worse the times, the greater the renewal. A people capable of seeing suffering as a call from God to return to the covenant, choosing and sanctifying life, is one that cannot be defeated because it can never lose hope."

YOM KIPPUR

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11-12 OCTOBER | 10 TISHREI

Visualising perfection



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Have you ever told someone that you will never do something again? Did you do that same thing again? How did that feel?

Maimonides (1138-1204) describes that in the process of repentance (Mishnah Torah, Laws of Repentance 1:1), one needs to declare to 'never repeat this sin again.' This is a demanding task! Let us be honest, I may know that I need to repent for gossiping, or putting my needs before the needs of others, but do I really think that I will never do that again?! Why is the bar so high for basic repentance?

The answer is found in the bigger picture of Yom Kippur. Purity. All day, we mimic angels, in our prayer, fasting and clothing, feeling a purity and disconnect from the world which we never otherwise feel. The goal is to gain a self-awareness of what life could be without sin. Even though the rest of the year may contain sin, Yom Kippur is an experience of what life is like without any material needs. Just spirituality.

That is why the requirements for repentance are so extreme. We must genuinely believe that we will never sin again. That every time our parents ask us to do something we will do it. Every time a friend crosses a line, I call them out. It may be that we live in the real world, where sin exists and we make mistakes, but

Yom Kippur is the chance to visualise what a sin-free life could mean.

In the 1990s, sports scientists started to explore the role of visualisation in sport. This is the theory that if an athlete has played through many situations in their head, they will be better prepared, more confident, and less pressurised to perform in a real game. Yom Kippur is a Jew's opportunity to visualise their own personal perfection to inspire them for the year ahead. Even without making blanket commitments, we must ask ourselves how we can be better friends.

Even if the road ahead is tricky, and marred with setbacks, we must know that with a self-awareness of what we can achieve, we can strive to be our best selves.

Yom Kippur Wordsearch

Find the words in the puzzle. Words can go in any direction and can share letters as they cross over each other.

**Holy, Kittel, Mussaf,
Neilah, White,
Yom Kippur,
Kol Nidrei, Fasting,
Shul, Machzor**

I	E	R	D	I	N	L	O	K	F
R	O	Z	H	C	A	M	I	A	X
E	T	I	H	W	M	T	S	B	N
X	R	L	P	U	T	T	X	E	L
H	Y	V	S	E	I	U	I	P	U
E	V	S	L	N	P	L	R	K	H
L	A	E	G	P	A	R	Z	B	S
F	Y	L	O	H	K	V	B	Y	M
Y	O	M	K	I	P	P	U	R	D
V	N	D	G	F	Y	C	P	V	K