



We are part of the human family: A reflection for Yom Kippur

AS WE approach Yom Kippur 2023, we in Israel are preparing to join with Jews around the world who flock to their synagogues on these High Holy Days in observing this special day through fasting, prayer, and reflection. During this period of the Jewish calendar – known as the *Aseret Y'mei Hatshuvah*, “The Ten Days of Return (or repentance),” we are meant to be engaging in intensive soul-searching, during which time we not only reflect upon the meaning of our personal and familial lives but also about our collective condition as part of the Jewish people. What have we done right this year? What have we done wrong? How can we correct our path to return to be the individuals – and the people – we were meant to be?

During these ten days, and especially on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, we are meant to engage in significant, serious, and sensitive series of prayer, study, and meditation, which will help us mend our ways. But will we do it? Or will we simply say the prayers in a rote fashion or listen to a sermon or two without hearkening to the sound of the *shofar*, the reminder that we have to awaken ourselves to the meaningful messages of this central day on the Jewish religious calendar?

Perhaps some of the prayers during this Yom Kippur can help us to not only to re-



Maurycy Gottlieb: 'Jews Praying in the Synagogue on Yom Kippur,' 1878

flect on our lives but also to take actions in the year ahead that will help heal the world.

Let's take a look at one of the central set of prayers for this day that might enable us to do this. As we do so, we will find that these prayers are a unique combination of universalism: caring for everyone, not just ourselves and our tribe; and particularism –

concern for the well-being of the Jewish people.

One of the central prayers that we recite silently and with the congregation during Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur is the *U v'khein* (from the first Hebrew word of this series of paragraphs). It consists of three paragraphs inserted into the *Amidah*, only on these days on the Jewish liturgical calendar. The set of prayers is said silently, and then collectively. The first paragraph reads as follows:

God, instill your awe in all You have made,

And fear of You in all You have created,

So that all You have fashioned revere You,

All You have created bow in recognition,

And all be bound together, carrying out Your will wholeheartedly.

(Translation from the *Mahzor Lev Shalem for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur*, the Rabbinical Assembly, 2010)

We remind ourselves on Yom Kippur – when we are thinking about our lives and our world today – that

we are all bound together in living on this planet. Climate change affects all of us, not just some people who appear to be suffering more at a given moment. The arms race and the prevalence of wars and conflicts is a global concern. There are many other global concerns, such as the trafficking of women around the world; the crises in immigration

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in many places; the addictions to drugs and to cellphones. On this day, we remind ourselves that we are part and parcel of humanity – we were all created in the image of God. This is an essential message of Yom Kippur and of Judaism.

However, we are also part of a people, the Jewish people. Judaism is not just a matter of “religion”; being Jewish is also being a member of this particular people, with its history and its contemporary issues, including the democratic character of the State of Israel, the growth of assimilation, the rise in antisemitism, and much more. Therefore, this second paragraph in this set of prayers reminds us of our connection to our people:

*Bestow honor to your people, O God
praise to those who revere You,
hope to those who seek You,
recognition to those who await You
joy to your land, and gladness to your city.*

As members of a people, we are meant to respect and honor each other, despite our widely divergent lifestyles and belief systems. Unfortunately, this does not happen too often and is undoubtedly one of the things we need to correct in the year(s) ahead.

Also, we look to the divine presence to give us hope, not only on this day. We need hope to overcome despair and depression, especially when the reality around us presents us with great moral and practical challenges. How shall we, as the Jewish people, treat other people who live under our control. Can we, as a people, become once again pursuers of peace and of justice? Can our land – and our state – be more open to people of other religions and nationalities? Can our capital city, Jerusalem, which ought to be a “holy” city – i.e., a special city – become a shared one instead of a divided one or one that is controlled by only one side? These are some of the questions that we will be reflecting on this Yom Kippur as in past years.

Can we be Jews who see ourselves as part

of the human family and at the same time members of a particular group called the Jewish people? Can we do both? I think that we can and we must.

The third paragraph of this set of prayers inserted into the *Amidah* for Yom Kippur helps us to realize the value of doing so.

*The righteous, beholding this, will rejoice,
the upright will be glad,
the pious will celebrate with song;
evil will be silenced,
And all wickedness will disappear like
smoke,*

*When You remove the tyranny of arrogance
from the earth.*

If we do both of these things together – be part of the human family and be loyal to our own people – then we will be truly able to rejoice! This is clearly what we ought to be doing – silencing evil, combating wickedness, removing the tyranny of arrogance from our countries and the world.

I am mindful of this paragraph every year, especially this year, and I remember that it was important to me in the past. When I attended the demonstration against the government in autumn 1982, after the massacre of innocent Palestinians by Christian militias in Sabra and Shatila (near Beirut), which was done with the help of the IDF, I remember vividly that there were many people carrying signs with this double message:

“Remove the tyranny of arrogance from the world.”

כִּי תַעֲבִיר מִמְשָׁלָתָּךְ יָדוֹן מִן הָאָרֶץ

The Hebrew word *memshalah*, here translated as “tyranny,” also refers to the government of Israel. And it should refer to the government of Israel this year more than ever before.

This year, together with other members of my family, I am participating in the largest and most significant protest movement in the history of Israel. For me, this is a religious act. It emerges out of my Jewish conscious-

ness from these prayers on Yom Kippur, as well as other central concepts in Judaism, such as treating the stranger in your midst fairly, pursuing justice, and loving peace. All these ideas are central to my Judaism (and I have written about them often in my writings over the years). Yet, these particular prayers on Yom Kippur serve to catalyze me to be more of an activist for deeply Jewish ethical reasons.

This whole section of special prayers concludes with the following statement:

“As Your prophet Isaiah wrote: ‘The Lord of Hosts will be exalted through justice, the holy God sanctified through righteousness.’ Praised are you, God, the Holy Sovereign.”

In addition, we read from the Prophet Isaiah (from chapters 57 and 58) after the Torah reading on Yom Kippur. In those passages, Isaiah explains the meaning of fasting: “to unlock the fetters of wickedness, to let the oppressed go free, to share your bread with the hungry, to take the wretched poor into your home, when you see the naked, clothe...”

On this Yom Kippur, let us be reminded that we are part of the human family, that our destinies are tied up with what is happening in the world, that we care for the suffering of all human beings, not just members of our tribe.

At the same time, we are part of the Jewish people, a people that ought to be seeking justice and peace in the world, in its country and region, if it is to remain loyal to authentic Jewish values.

In practice, this means that we need to protest against all attempts to create a state in Israel that is based on values that distort Judaism, a state that would oppress its minorities and control another people living on the same land with cruelty and daily humiliation rather than justice and righteousness. In the spirit of Yom Kippur, we need to do our part to remove tyranny and arrogance not only from the world but also from our own society. ■