

Weren't We Just Forgiven?

Rabbi Joel Seltzer, Vice Chancellor for Institutional Advancement, JTS



This coming Monday night Jewish people around the world will officially conclude the holiday of Yom Kippur, and then immediately engage in one of the most confounding rituals of the year. After a day spent refraining from all earthly concerns, after hours of penitential prayer aimed at inspiring the individual to commit themselves to a year filled with less mistakes, and more mitzvot, after the gates of prayers are closed but before we have broken our fasts, what do we do? We daven *Ma'ariv*, the Evening Service.

Now, this in and of itself, is not what confounds me—we always conclude our holidays and fast days with an evening service that expresses gratitude for the separation between holy and regular time. No, what confounds me is one paragraph in the evening *Amidah*, which makes complete theological sense on any other evening of the year, but not on the night which ends Yom Kippur.

As in every weekday *Amidah*, the sixth *berakhah* asks God for forgiveness, and it is customary to strike one's breast (as we do throughout the day on Yom Kippur) as we say:

סָלַח לָנוּ אֱבִינֵנוּ כִּי חָטָאנוּ מְחַל לָנוּ מַלְכֵנוּ כִּי פָשְׁעָנוּ כִּי מוֹחֵל וְסוֹלֵחַ אַתָּה: בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְהוָה חַנוּן הַמְרַבֵּה לְסִלּוֹחַ

“Forgive us *Avinu*, for we have sinned: pardon us, *Malkein*, for we have transgressed—for Your nature is to forgive and pardon.”

On all other days, this blessing is a powerful reminder of the countless missteps that befall us every day of our lives. And each day, by asking God for forgiveness, we are being conscious and intentional about the types of people we wish to be. We recount—then we recommit. But on *motzei* Yom Kippur, this blessing makes little sense. Is it possible that I committed a sin in the last thirty seconds since the gates closed at the end of the *Ne'ilah* service? Shouldn't this be

my most blameless moment of the entire year, and yet, here I am, beating my breast and beseeching God for forgiveness yet again?

I believe that possible answers to this theological challenge can be found in this week's parashah, *Ha'azinu*, and in the haftarah for Shabbat Shuvah, which is read on the Sabbath between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

In our Torah portion, *Ha'azinu*, we read Moses's final poem to the People of Israel before his death. The poem serves as God's anticipatory warning to the nation not to forget or forsake the source of their good fortune. “He who found him in a desert region. In an empty howling waste. He engirded him, watched over him, guarded him as the pupil of his eye” (Deut. 32:10). And yet, despite God's kindness, God knows that eventually the Jewish people will be led astray. “You neglected the Rock that begot you, Forgot the God who brought you forth” (Deut. 32:18). The poem concludes with God's promise to bring retribution both upon the People of Israel, and ultimately upon the enemy nations of the world, whom God utilizes as tools of divine punishment.

In our Torah portion we learn the truth, that no matter how blameless and upright we might feel in one instant, life has a way of challenging our unfounded notions of perfection and reminding us that we are works in a constant state of progress. Striking our chests during the *Amidah* which follows Yom Kippur and proclaiming yet again “Forgive us—God!” is a ritual manifestation of this theology. I may be blameless now, but not for long, not forever.

Our haftarah, from which this Shabbat derives its name, is unique in that it includes writings from three different prophets (Hosea, Joel, and Micah) among the “The Twelve Minor Prophets,” or the “*Trei Asar*.” The core section, from

Hosea, contains a clear message that not only is repentance possible—indeed it is welcomed by God with joy!

שׁוּבָה יִשְׂרָאֵל עַד יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ כִּי כָשַׁלְתָּ בְּעֹנְוֶךָ:

Return, O Israel, to the ETERNAL your God, For you have fallen because of your sin. (14:2)

אֲרַפָּא מִשׁוּבְתֶם אֶהְיֶם נְדָבָה כִּי שָׁב אִפִּי מִמָּוָה:

I will heal their affliction,
Generously will I take them back in love;
For My anger has turned away from them. (14:5)

From the words of Hosea we can understand that despite our regular lapses along our path towards self-improvement, God desires a relationship. But this relationship takes work; it requires maintenance and careful attention to ritual. After all, our relationship with God is not merely an instant in time, it is a constant in time. Therefore, even though we just spent an entire day demonstrating to God how seriously we take this relationship, we are nonetheless obligated to maintain the regularity of the ritual, and show that our commitment is continuous, not contingent on a single day of the calendar year.

In his commentary on the opening word of this morning's haftarah, *Shuvah* (Return), the 11th-century Spanish commentator Abraham Ibn Ezra adds the following teaching, and in so doing, builds on the lessons discussed above:

שובה: מעט מעט עד השם

“Return: little by little to God.”

May we all continue our work in progress in the coming year as we return, little by little, to strengthen and deepen our relationship with God.