

TorahFax: Haazinu
Rabbi Zalmen Marozov

Tuesday, Tishrei 4, 5784 / September 19, 2023

As we begin the New Year, 5784, I want to take this opportunity to wish you and your loved ones a Shana Tova - a wonderful, joyous, healthy, sweet, and successful year in every area.

May G-d answer all our prayers with positive results. May G-d fulfill our prayer for peace in Israel and the world. May G-d grant strength and protection to the men and women who serve in the IDF and to all who dedicate their lives to protect our Holy Land. May G-d bless them and watch over them. Amen.

There are ten days from the first day Rosh Hashana through Yom Kippur. These days are called "Aseret Yemai Teshuva" - "Ten days of repentance." Our sages tell us that on Rosh Hashana, the verdict for the New Year is written. However, it is not sealed until the end of Yom Kippur. Thus, even a harsh decree, G-d forbid, may still be changed between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur.

In the Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur prayers we recite, "Teshuva (repentance), Tefilla (prayer) and Tzedakah (charity) annul a severe decree." During these days it is important that we perform more mitzvot, especially the mitzvah of Tzedakah - by giving more charity. By helping others, we too, will be rewarded measure for measure and granted whatever we need for the coming year.

A person who lived all his life in the big city decided one day to become a farmer. He bought a parcel of land and went to live on the farm. Knowing that his success depends on rain, he prayed fervently for rain. His prayers were answered, and much rain descended on the fields. Now he was sure that his field would yield many fruits and vegetables. Yet, a while later when he checked his field, to his dismay, he found only weeds.

His disappointment became even greater when he saw that all his neighbors' fields were indeed filled with beautiful fruits and vegetables.

In despair, he approached one of his neighbors, "My field had the same amount of rain as yours. My field had the same sunshine as yours. My field is even the same size as yours, yet mine didn't yield any fruit while yours did. Can you explain to me what happened?"

"The answer is simple!" explained the neighbor. "G-d's blessings are only effective when you do what is expected of you. I planted seeds, fertilized the ground, and removed the weeds, so now G-d's blessing of rain has brought forth wonderful fruits. You, however, didn't do anything in your field. All you did was pray, but you didn't do anything to cultivate G-d's blessings. How can you expect His blessings to bear fruit?"

The same is true with our prayers. On Rosh Hashana we ask G-d to grant us everything we need in the coming year, but that is not enough. We have to do our part. The mitzvot and good deeds we perform are the seeds we sow in order for G-d's blessings to take effect. Between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur is the most appropriate time to begin planting...

Wednesday, Tishrei 5, 5784 / September 20, 2023

Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, begins Sunday night. It is the only fast day mentioned in the Torah. All other fast days in the Hebrew calendar are Rabbinical requirements.

All other fast days are to commemorate a tragic event which happened throughout history to our people. However, Yom Kippur, while being a holiday and a happy day, is also a fast day. In fact, on other holidays one is prohibited from fasting, while Yom Kippur is an exception, when we are required to fast.

On Yom Kippur the special YIZKOR prayer is recited. YIZKOR is said four times during the year: On Passover, Shavuot, Shmini Atzeret and on YOM KIPPUR.

Yizkor means to REMEMBER. In this special prayer we remember our loved ones who passed away and whose souls are bound up in the bond of eternal life in Heaven. Yizkor connects us with our loved ones who have passed on. By remembering them, they too remember us at this time of the year.

Our sages tell us that it's not enough just to remember them in our minds and with our words. We have to remember them with good deeds. The purpose of the Yizkor prayer is to remember them through the performance of the mitzvah of Tzedakah-charity, which we donate in their memory. In the Yizkor prayer we mention their names and also specify that charity was given, or will be given, in their memory.

Our parents, while they were alive, cared for us unconditionally. There was nothing too difficult for them to do for us. But now that they are not here physically, it is we who can do for them what they cannot do for themselves. Mitzvot can only be performed in this world. Every mitzvah and good deed we do in their honor brings merit to their souls. This is especially true when we give charity in their memory and in their honor. It brings them merit and reward in the World-to-Come.

Yizkor is our way of saying to our parents who are in heaven, "I love you. I miss you. I remember you." It is our way of expressing our connection to them by donating to charity in their memory. Our parents and loved ones in heaven feel our love and connection. They in turn, intercede on our behalf on high. They pray for us and shower us with blessings.

The Yizkor prayer is our 3,000-year gold-chain link with our past generations. It gets longer and longer as time passes, but also gets stronger and stronger with time. Our loved ones who are deceased did their part, now it's up to us to do ours.

Q. In each of the Yom Kippur prayers, the "Vidui - confession" is said. The confession is said in the plural, "We have sinned...We have transgressed..." etc. Why is it recited in the plural, not in the singular, "I have sinned," etc.?

A. Our rabbis explain that as Jews we are not only responsible for our own deeds, but for our fellow Jew as well. If another Jew transgresses, we are all partly responsible. Thus, we confess and ask forgiveness not only for our sins, but also for others who sinned.

Friday, Tishrei 7, 5784 / September 22, 2023

This Shabbat we read from the Torah Parshat Ha'azinu. Ha'azinu is one Parsha before the last in the Torah. The last Parsha, V'Zot Habracha, is always read on Simchat Torah.

This Shabbat, which is between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, is called Shabbat Teshuva – Shabbat of repentance, because it falls during the ten days of Tesuvah-repentance.

Yom Kippur is the only fast mentioned in the Torah. All other fasts during the year are Rabbinical requirements. Also, all other fasts are to commemorate a negative event which happened throughout Jewish history, Yom Kippur, when our sins are forgiven, makes it a happy and joyous day.

Q. What happened on this day that G-d designated as a day of forgiveness for all generations?

A. Forty days after the Giving of The Torah at Mount Sinai, the Jewish people sinned by making and worshipping the Golden Calf. When Moshe came down the mountain and saw this, he broke The Tablets. Moshe went back up the mountain and prayed for the next 40 days for forgiveness for his people. G-d then told him to bring up another set of Tablets and He will again engrave the Ten Commandments in them. It was on Yom Kippur that G-d gave Moshe the Second Tablets and with this G-d forgave the people for their grave sin. As a result, G-d proclaimed the day of Yom Kippur – Day of Forgiveness for all future generations.

Q. If Yom Kippur is a happy holiday, why do we fast on Yom Kippur?

A. There are a number of reasons: 1) Being the Day of forgiveness, it is fitting for us to spend the time in spiritual matters. We should derive pleasure from prayers and not from physical appetites.

2) The Torah tells us that at the time of the Giving of the Torah, the people of Israel, "Beheld G-d while they were eating and drinking" (Exodus 24:11 - See Rashi). This excessive feasting, according to our rabbis, showed a lack of respect and eventually led to worshipping the Golden Calf and resulted in the breaking of the Tablets. Yom Kippur was the day in which G-d forgave Israel for the sin of the Golden Calf and also the day when Moshe returned with the Second Tablets. Since their excessive eating and drinking was a factor in the breaking of the First Tablets, we correct this sin by avoiding food and drink on Yom Kippur, the day when Moshe descended with the Second Tablets.

3) Fasting humbles a person. Thus, on Yom Kippur, when we must perform teshuva-repentance with all our heart, we refrain from eating or drinking.

4) On Yom Kippur, when we are forgiven for our sins, we are considered pure like angels. We express this by acting like angels who don't eat or drink.