

JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

Yom Kippur

Throughout the year, when reciting the Shema prayer, we say the first verse out loud, and then whisper the line “Blessed is the Name of His glorious kingdom for all eternity.” But when we say the Shema on Yom Kippur, both at night and in the morning, we say both lines out loud. Why do we deviate from our normal practice? The Midrash teaches that Moshe heard the line “Blessed is the Name...” from the angels, and then he taught it to the Jewish people. Throughout the year, we say it in an undertone because we cannot praise G-d like the angels. On Yom Kippur, we elevate ourselves to the level of angels and say it out loud just like they do. The Midrash is difficult to understand. Why do we pretend to be angelic one day a year, if we clearly know that as human beings we will never reach the level of angels?

In the repetition of the Standing Prayer every day of the year, we say verses from the Prophets which contain the praise of the angels. We call this kedusha (holiness), because the angels discuss the G-d’s holiness, and we introduce these verses by saying that we plan to talk about the holiness of G-d “just as they do so in the heavens above.” We do not delude ourselves into thinking we even approach the level of angels. We simply say that when we praise Hashem, we choose to use the same formula as the angels.

Likewise, in the Yom Kippur prayers, we acknowledge that we cannot reach the level of angels. Before we say kedusha on Yom Kippur, we chant a poem attributed to R’ Meshullam ben Klonimos of 11th Century Germany. In it, he contrasts the holy angels and mortal man. “The force of Your praise is said by pure heavenly nobles...Yet You desire praise from those of limited life spans, who have forgotten goodness, who are sated with rage, who souls are aggrieved, and this is Your glory!” This introduction to the kedusha of Yom Kippur clearly states that we do not consider ourselves to match the angels. To the contrary, we realize that although we have so many imperfections and weaknesses, G-d still longs for our praise and it brings glory to His Name in a way that the praise of the angels cannot.

If we do not really believe we can reach the level of the angels, why do we say “Blessed is the Name...” out loud? It must be that we understand on Yom Kippur we can actually rise above the normal playing field of mortal man and, on some level, come closer to the level of angels. Angels do not have any physical characteristics and do not have any evil inclination, so they do not need to resist temptations in order to do the will of Hashem. When we push aside physical pleasures such as eating, drinking, and even bathing on Yom Kippur, this sensitizes us to the metaphysical parts of our being.

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which often stand in the way of sensitizing ourselves because we subdue the physical drives. We can access the pure soul that we possess more easily than during the rest of the year, to spirituality. So in the sense of becoming more in tune with our spiritual essence, we resemble angels on Yom Kippur more so than on any other day of the year.

The numerical value of hasatan (the Satan) equals 364, hinting that Satan controls us every day of the year except for one day. The Talmud says that Satan is also the source of the drive to do evil, the yetzer hara, which exists within every person. On Yom Kippur, we can receive a clarity of purpose and meaning that we do not get the rest of the year, because our inclination to do good (yetzer tov) does not battle the evil inclination the way it does the other 364 days of the year. The evil inclination convinces us to identify ourselves with our bodies and physical possessions, and this makes us extremely concerned with our clothes, cars, and physical possessions. Yom Kippur is our once-a-year opportunity to identify with our souls, our pure thoughts, and our strivings to be elevated people who can bring glory to G-d through our every action.

Rabbeinu Yonah (13th Century) says we have a mitzvah to eat on the day before Yom Kippur because of the joy of the upcoming day. A person experiences great inner joy when he/she lives in harmony with the strivings of his/her neshama (soul) and develops a deeper relationship with the Almighty. While the Torah instructs us to physically afflict ourselves on Yom Kippur, it does not intend to induce a state of sadness. On the contrary, pushing aside physical indulgence temporarily frees us from the shackles of our physical drives and the ways they cause us to perceive ourselves. Ironically, the physical afflictions of Yom Kippur can help us get a sense of true inner peace and happiness.

One should not think that the heightened spiritual experience of Yom Kippur cannot be accessed throughout the year as well. In Psalm 27, which we say daily from the beginning of Elul through the end of Sukkot, King David refers to a voice within himself that continuously seeks a spiritual connection with G-d. He says, "On Your behalf, my heart has said 'Seek My Presence.'" Rashi says this refers to a part within David that talks to him, acting as a messenger for G-d as it were, longing for David to come close to Him. David responds, "Your Presence, Hashem, do I seek." We all have an inner voice, coming from our pure neshama, which longs to relate to G-d. We have the gift of Yom Kippur which helps us access that inner voice, and in that way, come closer to the level of the completely spiritual angels. May the memory of our Yom Kippur experience help us rekindle the holy spark within us throughout the entire year.

Shabbat Shalom!

