Thoughts for Yom Kippur

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By

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Fasting and praying are important ingredients of Yom Kippur and are signs of repentance for our transgressions against God. But, as is well known, Yom Kippur does not provide atonement for sins committed against human beings.

Maimonides teaches (Laws of Repentance, 2:9): “Repentance and the Day of Atonement only atone for sins between human beings and God, but interpersonal sins are never forgiven until a person has made restitution and appeased the one whom he has wronged….Even if he merely belittled a person with words, he must appease him and go to him until he is granted forgiveness.”

Rabbinic tradition has it that a person can expect to be judged by God with the same standard of judgment that a person applies to others. If a person is mean-spirited and unfair in treatment of fellow human beings, these same qualities will be applied by the Heavenly court.

The Haftarah on the morning of Yom Kippur is drawn from Isaiah, where the prophet reminds the Israelites that God wants purity of behavior, compassion to the poor and downtrodden. God rejects outward shows of piety and insists on genuine righteousness. God chastises those who “bend their heads as a bulrush and spread a couch of sackcloth and ashes” when in fact they conduct their lives immorally. “Will you call this a fast and a day acceptable to the Lord? Is not this the fast that I choose, to loosen the fetters of wickedness, to undo the bonds of the yoke, sending the oppressed free and breaking every yoke? Is it not to break your bread for the hungry, and that you bring to your house the outcast poor…?”

It is said of the great 16th century sage, Rabbi Isaac Luria, that he would not recite his afternoon prayers until he first paid his workmen for their days’ labor. He reasoned: how can I appear before God if I do not meet my moral obligation to pay my workers on time? It is hypocritical to mouth pious words to God while at the same time being guilty of improper behavior and slander toward one’s fellow human beings.

It is customary among pious Jews to pay their debts on time, and certainly in advance of Yom Kippur. It is customary to make peace with those whom one has

mistreated, disrespected, maligned or betrayed. It is customary to increase charitable contributions to those institutions that foster proper Torah values and that provide assistance to the needy. These things are important in themselves; but are especially important when entering Yom Kippur when we seek atonement from the Almighty. We need to come before God with clean hands.

Maimonides provides another very important lesson in his Laws of Repentance (2:10): “It is forbidden for a person to be cruel and to withhold forgiveness. Rather, one should be easy to pacify and difficult to anger. When a sinner asks forgiveness, one should grant it with a full heart and willing soul. Even if the other had sinned greatly against him and caused him much anguish, he should not take revenge or bear a grudge.”

Yom Kippur can be just another external show of piety; or it can be a transformative occasion. The decision is ours to make.

Angel for Shabbat