Atonement and Renewal: Thoughts for Parashat Aharei Mot

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Aharei Mot

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel

This week's Parasha includes atonement ceremonies connected with Yom Kippur. Once each year, the high priest performed rituals on behalf of the people of Israel. When the Second Temple in Jerusalem was razed by the Romans in 70 CE, these rituals ceased. But we continue to have the observance of Yom Kippur in our synagogues.

On one hand, the annual Day of Atonement has a pessimistic quality to it. We know in advance that no matter how hard we try to be righteous, we will still need to repent next Yom Kippur. The cycle of repentance and atonement never ends.

On the other hand, the annual Day of Atonement has an optimistic quality to it. It reminds us that life is an ongoing process in which we can grow, improve, change. We admit our sins and shortcomings but we don't get mired in guilt. We repent; we seek atonement from the Almighty. We start the New Year with a clean slate.

In one of his Teshuva lectures, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik commented on two aspects of the repentance process. We ask the Almighty for *mehila,* forgiveness; and we also seek *kapara* and *tahara,* spiritual cleansing and purification.

Mehila is a technical matter. For example, if we owe a person money and we ask forgiveness of the debt, the person can indeed forgive our debt. We now owe nothing to that person; our slate is clear. But we haven't necessarily changed our own ways. Yes, we had this debt forgiven but we might still have a tendency to run up other debts and continue to be irresponsible in our financial behavior. *Mehila*

forgives our sins but doesn't mean that we've changed our ways.

Kapara and *Tahara* go beyond simply asking for and gaining forgiveness. These entail actual soul searching and the sincere desire to be cleansed of our negative qualities. We confess our sins to the Almighty and ask God to purify us, to help us change for the better. The goal of repentance is to make us into better people.

In the first chapter of his laws on repentance, Maimonides notes the requirement of making oral confession of sins. Unless we are able to verbalize our transgressions, we will find it difficult to achieve purification. It's human nature to see our virtues but downplay our shortcomings. Rationalization is common: what I did wasn't so bad; others have done much worse; I'm more righteous than most; God is compassionate and will forgive me. It is very difficult to say: I've done wrong; it's my fault; I am responsible for my unworthy behavior.

When we repent and confess, we are accepting the challenge of recognizing our sins; but we are also undertaking to become better human beings. We seek God's forgiveness; we ask God to cleanse and purify us; and we determine to move forward with heightened spirit and confidence.

At root, seeking atonement is a sign of a responsible human being. Confronting our weaknesses is a sure sign of our strength.