

Shiur for Kol Nidrei night 5784

This evening, I would like to discuss the relationship between Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and Sukkot. All three form a triangle of the Chagei Tishrei - the festivals of Tishrei - and are focused on repentance and judgement. In the talk tonight, we will discuss what the three festivals are atoning for; why they're in the order that they appear and why it is that their dates are so significant? We will go on a tour of a number of classical thinkers and introduce you to new Rabbis.

1. Rosh Hashanah. Why is Rosh Hashanah on the first and second day of Tishrei? Why are there two days when the Torah only mentions one and how do we understand the two days?

Unlike the other festivals where we celebrate two days of Yom Tov, even in Israel Rosh Hashanah is celebrated as a two-day festival. The reason relates to the appearance of the witnesses who saw the new moon and would travel to the Temple to testify. The problem was that if they arrived too late, the sacrifices and special prayers for Rosh Hashanah would be missed, so they ruled to keep a second day as well. The question is, what is the status of this second day? According to the Talmud and ruled by the codes of Jewish Law, the two days are viewed as one extended day. This has halachic implications which are beyond the talk of tonight. But the question is, why do we view the two days as one extended day and not as two days?

Rav Yonatan Eybeshutz, introduces us to a novel approach to our question. As we know, on Rosh Chodesh Elul, Moses went up the mountain to receive the second set of tablets, he would return on Yom Kippur. Rav Yonatan, suggests a groundbreaking idea, that the ten days from Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur mirror the ten commandments, and on each of the ten days we receive one commandment. We know that the first two commandments were heard directly from Hashem. We also know that at Mount Sinai they heard the sounds of the Shofar. So, the first two days of Rosh Hashanah correspond to the first two commandments. Day One, 'I am the Lord your God' and Day Two, 'you shall have no other gods but me'. In essence, the two are the same as, if I am the Lord then by definition there are no other gods. And since the first two commands were heard in one utterance, the first two days are considered one.

Initially Rosh Hashanah was observed for two days outside of Israel for the same reason that we have the two days of Pesach etc. The Talmud teaches that anyone who lives outside of Israel is considered as if they worship idols.

The activities of crowning Hashem king through the shofar and the themes of Malchiyot, Zichronot and Shofarot, mirror the first two commandments.

To follow on the fast of Gedalya, which commemorates the assassination the last Jewish governor, is linked to the sixth commandments of, 'though shall not murder', Shabbat Shuva corresponds to the fourth commandment of 'remember the Shabbat'.

Rav Yonatan explains that Erev Yom Kippur is related to Lo Tignov, not stealing because theft angers Hashem and leads to punishments. He further explains that this is the reason for the Kapparot. By taking a chicken that walks around eating/stealing food, we then slaughter the chicken and, according to the Shulchan Aruch, throw away the innards as an act of removing any forms of theft from us. This should stir us to repent from any theft we have done and to return what we have stolen. We thus ask Hashem to exchange any punishment we may have and place on the chicken as we have learnt our lesson. The approach is that when we enter Yom Kippur, we should have atoned for all the sins between man and man so that we can focus on the sins between man and God on Yom Kippur.

The significance of the 10

The Midrashic work called the Pesikta notes that in the sacrifices of Rosh Hashanah (Bamidbar 29:2-5) ten animals were brought. These correspond to the ten days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. When we repent during the ten days, Hashem guarantees that He will recreate us as a new pure entity. The Pesikta continues, that by quoting a verse in Isaiah (1,16-17) that mentions nine actions of purification. In Verse 18. the prophet then states that Hashem will wash away our sins and we will be purified. We see that if we use the nine days correctly, we will receive purification on the tenth, Yom Kippur.

Yom Kippur Lo Tachmod.

If we continue the theory of the ten days, corresponding to the ten commandments, we find that Yom Kippur corresponds to Lo Tachmod – 'thou shalt not covet'. And the question is why? The Vilna Gaon suggests that all sins are rooted in one source - desire or Chemdah. If the whole Torah is

encapsulated in the ten commandments- since the commandments are the chapter headings for all the mitzvot, it would seem that the tenth commandment encapsulates the other nine. For if one breaks the tenth, one will eventually break all the others. So, by controlling one's desire, one will protect Anochi – 'I am the Lord your God'.

So, on Yom Kippur we embed ourselves in no desires. Through the observance of the five prohibitions of the day we are able to, for a moment, remove the desire from our heart. No eating and drinking, no washing, no anointing, no leather shoes and no marital relations. Not only do we atone for the sins that come under these prohibitions, but also atone for the roots of these sins - desire.

Rav Yosef Engel, points out that in the ten commandments there is a difference between the texts in Yitro and Va'etchanan. In Va'etchanan in addition to the prohibition of Lo Tachmod, we are introduced to a second law of Lo Titave - do not desire.

On Yom Kippur we are trying to uproot the twin sins of coveting and desiring. It is thus no surprise that the Torah reading for Mincha, highlights the many sexual unions that are forbidden in Judaism.

The root of all sin, Adam and Eve

In the infamous events of the primordial sin. The snake speaks Lashon Hara, to seduce Eve to eat from the tree of knowledge. The text highlights this by stating, (Genesis 3:6) "And the woman perceived that the tree was good for eating and that it was a delight to the eyes and that the tree was desirable as a means of wisdom." We see that the terms taavah- desire and chemdah appears.

These three sins are grouped together. The Talmud in Babba Batra 165a states, "Most people steal – chemdah, some people commit sins of adultery – taavah, but all speak Lashon Hara". On Yom Kippur we atone for these three sins. The High Priest would offer the incense - which atones for the sin of Lashon Hara - the sins of speech. Today we might say through all our prayer services, theft and illicit relationships are atoned by the fact that this says there is no chemdah and taavah.

Summary so far:

We have seen that the ten days of repentance corresponds to the ten commandments and that each of the days atones for breaking one of the commandments. We see that Yom Kippur is a day on which we atone for Lo Tachmod and the foundational sins of desire, lust, and speech.

What about Sukkot?

On Yom Kippur we are given the spiritual tools to overcome chemdah and taavah. Sukkot is a time where we can repurpose them to serve Hashem. Let me explain.

Again, we will follow the teaching of Rav Engel. In Jewish thought, water symbolises desire - taavah. For what is desire - but to do what you want. Water too flows wherever it wants and is only contained by the vessel that it is in. Jacob says of Reuben Pachaz kamayim – you burst forth like water, never thinking!

The Ibn Ezra writes that (Shmot 20:14) writes, that the ten commandments correspond to the ten celestial bodies in the night sky. The celestial body that corresponds to Lo Tachmod - is the moon. For we know that the gravitational pull of the moon has a major effect on the tides, rivers, and affects us too, since we are made up of water. As such, the moon symbolises taavah- desire.

On Sukkot the entire focus of the festival is water. We use the four species which are linked to water to pray for rain. We pray on Shemini Atzeret for rain. And during the days of the Temple there was a ceremony called, Nissuch Hamayim - the water libation - where water was poured onto the altar in a joyous celebration called, Simchat Bait Hashoevah.

It is fascinating that we start the month with Rosh Hashanah – when there is no moon because we do not have the strength to deal with taavah, but by Sukkot we have a full moon. We can harness the taavah and channel it to serve Hashem. This may be the reason that we do Kiddush Levana – sanctifying the moon after Yom Kippur, because now that we have mastery over taavah and chemdah, we can channel them in the service of Hashem.

It is fascinating to note that the one of the suggestions for the fruit that Adam and Eve ate was an etrog. The desirous fruit. On Sukkot we take the etrog - to serve Hashem.

And so, after we have gone through Yom Kippur, we have the protective garments to channel the powerful forces of lust and desire in the service of Hashem. Shade is desirable and we sit in the shade of the sukkah surrounded by the holiness of the Divine. It is only via this journey through Tishrei that this is achievable. We pray that we can then maintain our control for the year ahead.

(Many of the ideas cited are based in Rabbi Daniel Glatstein's book, The mystery and the majesty.)