



*“Words from the Heart  
Enter the Heart”*

YOM KIPPUR 5773 • 2012

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

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September 26, 2012  
Yom Kippur - Kol Nidrei

**The Mystique Of Yom Kippur**



# Meaningful Sermons

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

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## ABSTRACT

What is it about Yom Kippur that remains embedded in the Jewish psyche, even for those that do not practice and do not observe any other holidays and traditions?

Even baseball – that American sacred shrine and symbol of utter secularism – has been impacted by Yom Kippur. Who hasn't heard about Sandy Koufax honoring Yom Kippur by refusing to pitch that day for the Dodgers in Game One of the 1965 World Series? (But do you know the follow-up to that story, what his replacement pitcher said after being pulled from the game?) Or about the standing ovation Detroit slugger Hank Greenberg received in his Synagogue in 1934?

Why do we sometimes cry for no apparent reason? What do our souls look like?

The meaning behind blessing our children (also our inner child), a moving story of Russian illiterate Jews on Kol Nidrei night, baseball bowing to Yom Kippur, what Kirk Douglas discovered about his uncontrollable tears and his Jewishness – all build up to appreciating Yom Kippur as an awesome day that tells each of us: "Here, allow me to introduce you to someone extraordinary: You. The true you."

## THE MYSTIQUE OF YOM KIPPUR DISCOVERING YOUR ESSENCE

### 1. Traditional Blessing (Optional Opening)

As we enter the most awesome day of the year – there is a beautiful custom to bless our children. Children also include our students. I would therefore like to begin by blessing you all with the traditional priestly blessing of *Yevorechecho* ...

Whether you are an adult or a child, whether you have been blessed by your parents or not, we can all use an extra blessing as we enter Yom Kippur.

But I especially want to extend this blessing to those of us here that may have sadly not had parents, or had parents that neglected to bless them, or did not know better.

In our deeply fractured world, it is our children that are most vulnerable and fragile. And the ones who most need nurturing, love and blessing.

There is no better time to bless our children then at the threshold of the holiest day of Yom Kippur, when all the gates open for us and when we can reach the deepest levels of our souls.

I thus extend to you all – to the inner child within us all – the blessing:

וידבר ייְהוָה אל משה לאמר  
דבר אל אהרן ואֶל בְּנָיו לאמר כה תברַכֵּן את בני יִשְׂרָאֵל אמור להם  
יְבָרַכְךָ ייְהוָה וישמרך  
יאר ייְהוָה פָּנָיו אליך ויחַנֶּךָ  
ישַׁא ייְהוָה פָּנָיו אליך וישֶׁם לך שְׁלוֹם  
וְשָׂמוּ אֶת שְׁמִי עַל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאֲנִי אֲבָרַכֶם

*The Lord spoke to Moses saying: Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying: This is how you shall bless the children of Israel, saying to them:*

*"May the Lord bless you and watch over you.*

*May the Lord cause His countenance to shine to you and favor you.*

*May the Lord raise His countenance toward you and grant you peace."*

*They shall bestow My Name upon the children of Israel, so that I will bless them.<sup>1</sup>*

## 2. Yom Kippur Mystique (Baseball Stories)

Of all days in the year, Yom Kippur stands out even for the most secular Jew. Almost anyone you ask in the world will know about Yom Kippur.

In 1965, Sandy Koufax refused to pitch in Game One of the World Series because it was Yom Kippur, a Jewish holy day. Instead of Koufax, Don Drysdale pitched for the Los Angeles Dodgers, and he gave up seven runs in 2 2/3 innings. "I bet right now you wish I was Jewish, too," Drysdale said to Walter Alston when the manager came to pull him from the game. The Dodgers lost to the Minnesota Twins, 8-2.

What is it about Yom Kippur that remains embedded in the Jewish psyche, even for those that do not practice and do not observe any other holidays and traditions?

I only cite baseball as an example – though frankly, entering the holiest day of the year is not a time to speak about baseball – because few things are venerated like baseball in America, and almost nothing takes precedent to the game (they even continued playing it during World War II to help boost the morale). And despite it being an American shrine and symbol of utter secularism, and despite the fact that Koufax and other Jewish players were not in any way observant, Yom Kippur still took precedent for them. As Shawn Green, another Dodger who declined to play on Yom Kippur, said in 2001: "There is nothing I would rather do than play against the Giants in a pennant race, but some things take precedence over that."

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<sup>1</sup> Numbers 6:24-26.

A number of baseball players have had to deal with Yom Kippur one way or another, some with humorous results.<sup>2</sup>

Take Detroit slugger, Hank Greenberg, known as the Jewish Babe Ruth, who chose to sit out play Yom Kippur 1934, inspiring an Edgar Guest poem in the Detroit Free Press which celebrated Greenberg's decision:

Came Yom Kippur – holy fast day worldwide over to the Jew,  
And Hank Greenberg to his teaching and the old tradition true  
Spent the day among his people and he didn't come to play.  
Said Murphy to Mulrooney, 'We shall lose the game today!  
We shall miss him on the infield and shall miss him at the bat  
But he's true to his religion – and I honor him for that!

When Greenberg arrived at synagogue that day, the service stopped, and the congregants gave him a rousing round of applause. Years later Greenberg said:

"The only way I would even think that I might have been a hero in those days was the day I walked in Shaarey Zedek Temple and got a standing ovation because I showed up in temple on Yom Kippur. The poor rabbi is standing on the podium *davening*, praying, and suddenly I walk in and everybody in the congregation gets up and applauds. The poor rabbi looks around; he doesn't know what is happening. And I'm embarrassed as can be, because it was all totally unexpected."

Or take this episode bordering on the superstitious: In 1969, Houston Astros outfielder Norm Miller said that he would no longer play on Jewish holidays, because when "I play on one and go 0-for-4 and the next day go 0-for-5 and that's it. I'll never play on a Jewish holiday again."<sup>3</sup>

All this only underscores how in our deeply secular world, with so much of Judaism unknown to so many Jews, Yom Kippur still remains a burning ember, deeply ingrained in Jewish consciousness.

What is behind Yom Kippur's enduring mystique?

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<sup>2</sup> Here is an ESPN collection of stories: [http://espn.go.com/classic/s/merron\\_on\\_green.html](http://espn.go.com/classic/s/merron_on_green.html).

<sup>3</sup> As recounted in *Ball Four*, by Jim Bouton.

### 3. Who Am I? (An Exercise)

Let us answer this question by asking ourselves another deep question (the typical way Jews answer questions):

“Who am I?”

To answer this, let’s try a theoretical exercise.

Imagine what you would be doing if you cut out all that keeps you busy – whether work or leisure, whether your career or jet travel, the meals in nice restaurants, the hours spent on the Internet or at the gym. Imagine all that gone. What would you be left with?

Scary, no?

Now imagine what you would be like if you closed down all your senses: shut your eyes, ears, taste, touch and smell.

If the first exercise was scary, this one might be terrifying: without any of your regular activities, and now without your senses to rely on, wouldn’t you just disappear?

The answer is: No, you would not.

Indeed, something absolutely wonderful – and unprecedented – would happen. The REAL YOU, the essence of your soul – would emerge, unfettered by your projected personality.

And this is what happens on Yom Kippur.

### 4. Emerging Souls

On Yom Kippur, when we refrain from material pleasure and involvements, our souls emerge.<sup>4</sup>

As long as we are preoccupied and immersed in everyday survival ... in our pedestrian routines and conventions ... struggling to earn a living and dealing with our worldly challenges – we cannot know who we truly are beneath the surface.

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<sup>4</sup> As the 16th century scholar, the Maharal of Prague, put it, “All of the *mitzvot* that God commanded us on [Yom Kippur] are designed to remove, as much as possible, a person’s relationship to physicality, until he is completely like an angel.”

As long our senses are over-stimulated and inundated by all the forces vying for our attention, we cannot have the presence of mind and heart to explore what makes us tick.

One day a year – the holiest and most sacred day – we “shut down” as many instruments as we can (and is humanly possible), we leave all the distractions behind, and we enter into the womb of the synagogue, clad in pure white, allowing our inner self to emerge.

Yom Kippur, then, is not a day of depravation, but one of discovery. Not a time of punishment and affliction, but one of reward and growth. We are not diminished, but enriched.

We are taking off our masks and exposing our true faces. We are moving away from the superficial and artificial to the real.

Imagine stripping all the layers of existence and cleansing the doors of our conventional perception – and all that we experience is the energy within that makes it all tick.

On Yom Kippur, we stop everything we have become accustomed to doing – all our habits and addictions. And, in the process, we learn to see ourselves in a new way.

The challenge is to actually enter and submerge in the Yom Kippur mode, and allow the holiness of this day to engulf us. Obviously, if we bring into this day all our past “baggage” of yesterday and beyond we are not allowing the power of Yom Kippur to manifest. On the contrary, we are “polluting” this sacred day with our usual toxins.

The key is to create space within ourselves, to put everything aside, and allow Yom Kippur to breathe through us. The more we open up the more will emerge.

Michelangelo was once asked how he sculpts those beautiful cherubs. He replied: “I saw the angels trapped in the marble. So I carved and set them free.”

Try that and you will see how refreshing and freeing the experience will be.

And once you do, once you experience the fullness of Yom Kippur, you will never settle for less again.

## 5. The Power of Yom Kippur

Yom Kippur was the only time of the year when the High Priest entered the Holy of Holies. The mystics explain that Yom Kippur – which the Torah coins *achas b'shana*<sup>5</sup> (literally “once a year”) – refers to the *achas*, the oneness and unity of the innermost dimension of the soul (*Yechida sheb'nefesh*).

The soul is comprised of five dimensions, one curled into the next: 1) The surface level of the soul is *Nefesh* – sensory life. 2) Layer two is *Ruach* – emotional life. 3) Next is *Neshomo* – intellectual life, 4) *Chaya* – transcendence and finally 5) *Yechida* – oneness, the pure essence of the soul.

*Yechida*, oneness, is the *pintele yid* – the inner dot, the purest point of your most intimate self. The inner child of innocence.

Our most tangible experiences are on the outer layers of the soul – this is what our surface senses and basic consciousness can perceive. But our truest and most meaningful experiences are on the inner levels of the soul, the deepest of them all on the *Yechida* level.

However, the deepest recesses of the soul are shrouded within its outer layers, which in turn are encased in the hard crust of the physical body and material universe.

This is the story of our lives. We are born pure and innocent children. Children who dream enchanted dreams, believe that everything is possible and expect the most. Vulnerable children – unpolluted and uncorrupted. Then life's challenges begin to seep into our experiences. We slowly (some faster than others) learn about deceit, disappointments and unrealized expectations. As the years roll on, the outer layers of our soul and the body's shell harden, innocence is lost and expectations are lowered. As we experience harsher realities, many of our dreams and ideals wane, some of us to a point of silent resignation, distracting ourselves with outer stimulation, anything that will relieve our existential loneliness. Some develop sharper tools like cynicism.

<sup>5</sup> Exodus 30:10. Leviticus 16:30. See Tosafot. Menochot 18a. For the spiritual meaning – see Ateret Rosh Shaar Yom HaKippurim ch. 2 ff. Kuntres HaHispalut ch. 4.



As much as we crave intimacy which resonates deep within us, the sad fact is that sensory stimulation consumes our daily lives, obfuscating our innocent essence, so that our inner life is left wanting if not plain starving.

So is there hope? Can we reach our inner child?

The answer is yes. And this is the power of Yom Kippur:

One day a year we are given the power to enter our holy of holies. And we enter with great care: We fast and suspend, as much as possible, our immersion in the material world. We spend the day in prayer and clothed in white – all to set the proper ambiance to enter the holiest place in our souls.

That one day is Yom Kippur – the day of the fifth dimension (hence, five prayers), when we celebrate *Yechida*. This is the one and only day in the year when each of us has the power to access our innocence. On this day we can become like the High Priest and enter our own holy of holies.

On Yom Kippur, each one of us returns to our inner child, to our innocence, to our purest place. But this time, the innocence and exuberance of the child comes joined with the seasoning and experience of an adult.

On this one day a year all the outer layers of our existence are stripped away, and the essence – the *Yechida* – of the soul emerges.

## 6. Spark and Flame

Chassidic teachings explain that Yom Kippur is compared to the “source drawing near to the spark.”<sup>6</sup> The “source” is God, and the “spark” is our soul, which is called “the flame of God.”

All year round the “source” is spiritually “distant,” i.e. concealed, from the “spark.” As we get closer to the High Holidays the “source” begins to draw nearer, become more revealed. On each progressive day the “source” draws closer and closer to the “spark.” The closest point is on Yom Kippur, specifically during *Neilah* (“Locking of the Gates”), the final prayer at sundown.

<sup>6</sup> *Derech Chaim* 13d. 21b. 91a. *Kuntres HaAvodah* end of ch. 5 (p. 35).

This is the moment when the spark and the flame come closest all year round. This is the most powerful moment of the year, when we are the closest that we can come to the essence of our identity.

And therein lays the power of Yom Kippur, and why it is embedded in the unconscious of every Jew – from the devout sage to the baseball slugger.

As the “source” gets closer to the “spark” in each of our souls, the spark senses (consciously or unconsciously) the tug of the flame; it begins to feel the warmth and it is drawn toward its mother flame. It’s like when you put your hand closer to a flame, you start feeling the warmth. Wherever that spark may be – in a yeshiva or a synagogue, at home or at work, on a baseball field or in a supermarket, in Israel or in Bangkok – it feels the call of the “mother flame,” and responds...

When it comes Yom Kippur every spark, no matter what type of body it occupies, feels a jolt – sensing its true identity (*Yechida*) beckoning. Can anyone reject the clarion call of his or her own essence?

Thus, every Jew, including Sammy Koufax, Hank Greenberg and countless others we may not know by name who have not revealed relationship with their Judaism – respond to the Yom Kippur call.

## 7. The Spontaneous Cry (Inspirational Story)

One powerful manifestation of the “mother flame’s” impact on the spark is the spontaneous feeling of sadness or joy that we experience on Yom Kippur.<sup>7</sup>

The actor Kirk Douglas – whose real name is Issur Danielovitch Demsky – writes in his memoir *Climbing the Mountain*, of how he came in touch with his soul following his stroke, and how it came to him in a flood of tears after he asked the question: “Who am I?”

<sup>7</sup> The Arizal therefore says that “one who does not cry on Yom Kippur (and Rosh Hashana) his soul is not complete” (*Pri Etz haim Sha’arPri Etz haim Sha’ar HaShofar* ch. 5. *Sha’ar HaKavanot Derushei Rosh Hashana*. Siddur HaArizal end of *Seder haNesirah*. See also *Likkutei Sichos*)

I would be alone in my room when such dark thoughts would come upon me , and suddenly the tears would start to flow. I'd feel silly, but I couldn't stop them. Sometimes I castigated myself for giving in to self-pity. But at other times, I wasn't even sure why I was crying. I just felt a deep sadness. Then I read in *Toward A Meaningful Life*, a book [recording the wisdom of the Rebbe] the late Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson:

"Have you ever just burst out in tears for no apparent reason, finding yourself in a deep sadness? That is the soft voice of your soul, crying out for attention, asking to be nourished with as much care as you nourish the body.

"Have you ever experienced a truly sacred moment, when, despite the constant turmoil of life, you felt a profound sense of awe and belonging? That, too, is the voice of your soul, expressing a deep satisfaction with its intrinsic connection to the forces of spirituality."<sup>8</sup>

## 8. The Collective Cry (Inspirational Story)

We find Yom Kippur's impact on each individual soul also expressed at times in a collective way. Here is one moving account of many that reflect the awesome innocence of Jews on Yom Kippur – and the power that carries as it pierces all heavens.

When *perestroika* became a reality in the former Soviet Union, Jews after many decades of forced assimilation were finally able to live openly as Jews again. The next year, in 1987, a young rabbi, was leading the Kol Nidrei services in the main synagogue of Kiev on Yom Kippur night.

Announcements of the services had been posted all over the city and Jews responded eagerly. Old men who remembered accompanying their parents to shul as children, young families who wanted a taste of their heritage after more than a half-century of Soviet persecution, and youth in their teens who barely knew they were Jewish, flocked to the synagogue.

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<sup>8</sup> vol. 9, pp. 206. *ful Life: The Wisdom of the Rebbe*, adapted by Simon Jacobson, p. 4.

The cantor chanted Kol Nidrei. The moving melody stirred the hearts of all those who had come. But as the service proceeded, the rabbi sensed feelings of disappointment beginning to surface. After all, most of the people had never been in a synagogue in their lives; none of them knew how to pray together with the cantor. Despite the best intentions, Hebrew-Russian prayerbooks, and explanations in Russian, he could sense that the people were becoming bored, and within their hearts a question was beginning to take form: Were these the prayers that they had yearned for so many years to be allowed to say?

In the middle of the services, after the silent prayer said while standing, known as the *Amidah*, the young rabbi decided to make one more attempt to strengthen their involvement in the proceedings, so he ascended to the lectern and began to tell a classic Chassidic story:

One Yom Kippur, the Baal Shem Tov was praying together with his students in a small Polish village. Through his spiritual vision, the Baal Shem Tov had detected that harsh heavenly judgments had been decreed against the Jewish people, and he and his students were trying with all the sincerity they could muster to cry out to God and implore Him to rescind these decrees and grant the Jews a year of blessing.

This deep feeling took hold of all the inhabitants of the village and everyone opened his heart in deep-felt prayer.

Among the inhabitants of the village was a simple shepherd boy. He did not know how to read; indeed, he could barely read the letters of the *alef-beit*, the Hebrew alphabet. As the intensity of feeling in the synagogue began to mount, he decided that he also wanted to pray. But he did not know how. He could not read the words of the prayer book or mimic the prayers of the other congregants. So he opened the prayer book to the first page and began to recite the letters: *alef, beit, veit, gimmel, dalet, heh, vav* ... reading the entire alphabet. He then called out: "O God, this is all I can do. I don't know how to pray or what to say; so please take these letters and form them into the words that You would like to hear."

This simple, genuine prayer resounded powerfully within the Heavenly court. God rescinded all the harsh decrees and granted the Jews blessing and good fortune.

The Rabbi paused for a moment to let the story impact his listeners. Suddenly a voice called out, "alef." And thousands of voices thundered back "alef." The voice continued: "beit," and the thousands responded "beit." They continued to pronounce every letter in the Hebrew alphabet. And then they began to file out of the synagogue.

They had recited their prayers. That was their Yom Kippur. Their process.

How will ours be?

## 9. The Soul Revealed

Yom Kippur teaches us to get back to the essence and respect the emergence of the soul.

We sit quietly in a synagogue, robed in innocent white, like the day we were born ... allowing our souls to speak ... praying ... connecting to the naked core of our reality, stripped of the man-made layers and infrastructures.

This process begins now, with *Kol Nidrei* when we shed our conventions by absolving ourselves of all our superimposed commitments. We want our inner self to emerge as we unwrap the shrouds ... and the process of growth to begin as we let go of our misplaced need for control ... as we ponder who we are.

Even the most cynical among (and within) us has a pure side. Even the most jaded has a moment of truth. Yom Kippur teaches us the most vital message of hope: Never give up on your self – on your inner, pure self. No matter how challenging your life has become, no matter how worn down you are, for despite your bitter disappointments, losses and wounds, your inner child always remains intact.

Even if you give up on everything, never give up on that pure child that lies embedded within you. That child – the holiest part of your heart and soul – may be your last vestige of your greatest potential, and your last refuge of hope.

If nothing else – one day a year hold on to what is most dear. Give your child, your soul, a chance to speak to you.

Cherish your child. Protect her. Nurture her tenderness. Above all, be kind to her. After all, she is you – the best of you.

Imagine a childhood picture of yourself. Then juxtapose it over your life today. Ask yourself: How far have I wandered from my own innocence? How much purity have I lost? How did I get from there to here? And how can I retrieve that purer part of myself? Ask God to help you find ways to reclaim your own innocence.

And perhaps, perhaps – as the Yom Kippur curtain closes with the setting of the sun and the child goes back into hiding, she will feel a bit safer to show her face more often than just once a year.

You now have 24 hours to access and connect to your true identity.

Yom Kippur is many things, but above all: It's about seeing yourself face to face. Seeing the entire Jewish people at their best – in their most intimate, beautiful state.

Yom Kippur is a day that says: "Here, allow me to introduce you to someone extraordinary: You. The true you."

Imagine: Amidst all the distractions of life, amidst all the turbulence, you have one day in the year which reminds you and me and every Jew who we truly are.

The rest is commentary.

Amen.