



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

YOM KIPPUR 5777 • 2016

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

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Yom Kippur - Kol Nidrei

**Can One Day Really
Change Anything?**



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart 5777 Enter the Heart”*

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ABSTRACT

There is a well-known saying: “Sometimes one day changes everything; sometimes years change nothing.”

Can one day really change everything? Can one day really change *anything*?

The Talmudic tractate that discusses Rosh Hashanah is titled, appropriately enough, *Rosh Hashanah*. But the tractate that discusses Yom Kippur is titled, oddly enough, *Yoma*, meaning “the day.”

The great 16th century Talmudist, the Maharsha, explains the reason for this. His brilliant analysis includes the anatomy of the day, the World to Come and Satan.

His explanation is brought home by a moving story of how one single act on one single day changed the life of a junior high-school student who was about to commit the most desperate of all acts – suicide.

But the bottom line is that yes, one single day – in this case the 25 hours of Yom Kippur or *Yoma* – has the power of changing all eternity.

As we will learn, the secret to a good and healthy year lies in the secret to a good and healthy day.

CAN ONE DAY REALLY CHANGE ANYTHING?

1. One Day Changes Everything - Saying

There is a well-known Irish (which is basically Yiddish with kilt/no guilt) saying: "Sometimes one day changes everything; sometimes years change nothing."

Can one day really change everything? Can one day really change *anything*?

Outside of these hallowed walls, the sun is setting on a Tuesday eve. Inside of this sanctuary, we and all our brothers and sisters throughout the world begin to usher in the holiest day of the year - one single day, a day that is called *Shabbat Shabbaton*,¹ "the Shabbat of all Shabbats," a day which transforms reality and touches the heart and soul of every single Jew, man, woman, child.

Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, is just one day out of 365. *Achat ba'shanah*, once a year.² So how can this little window of time, this one single day, little more than 25 hours, change everything?

On one hand, one day seems inconsequential; on the other, look at your wedding day, the day your child was born, or the day a loved one passed away. One day can change everything. Eternity can be had in one day.

2. Eternity in an Hour - Blake's Poem (Optional)

As William Blake, the famed English poet, put it in "Auguries of Innocence":

To see a World in a Grain of Sand

And a Heaven in a Wild Flower

¹ Leviticus 16:31. 23:32.

² Exodus 30:10. Leviticus 16:34.

Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand

And Eternity in an hour...

Concluding:

God Appears & God is Light

To those poor Souls who dwell in Night

But does a Human Form Display

To those who Dwell in Realms of day³

3. The Talmud and Yoma - The Day

What does the Talmud say about the power of this one day?

The Talmud, as we know, is the documentation of all the oral teachings of the Torah. At Mount Sinai, in addition to giving us the Ten Commandments, G-d also taught the Torah to Moses, who in turn taught it to the people of Israel.⁴

From Moses to Joshua, to the kings and prophets, through Temple times, the Torah scrolls were handed down and their contents were taught and studied, transmitted and discussed from teacher to student, parent to child, every oral teaching and every profound nuance passed down from generation to generation. While individuals did take personal and private notes, by and large the oral tradition was conveyed orally, it was not written and was not published.

That is until Rabbi Yehudah HaNassi foresaw that the world was changing, that foreign influences were growing, and that Jews were being dispersed more and more. Therefore, fearing the loss of transmission, he gathered the essence of the oral tradition and collected it in the *Shisha Sidrei Mishnah*, the Six Orders of the Mishnah.

³ <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poems/detail/43650>.

⁴ See Maimonides' introduction to Mishneh Torah.

The Mishnah was followed by the Gemara, the exploration and elucidation of the Mishnah by the sages of Israel. Together, the Mishnah and the Gemara are known the world over as the Talmud, a 63-volume body of work that covers and addresses the entire gamut of Jewish experience. From festivals to torts, from relationships to offerings, from contracts to agriculture, the Talmud comprises the encyclopedic foundation of all Jewish law.

One of the Six Orders of the Mishnah is called *Seder Moed*, the Festival Order. It addresses the laws of Shabbat and the festivals. *Seder Moed* consists of 12 tractates, the titles of most of which are self-explanatory: *Shabbat* covers Shabbat, *Pesachim* Passover, *Sukkah* Sukkot, *Rosh Hashanah* Rosh Hashanah... but then there is *Yoma*. What does *Yoma* mean? What festival does *Yoma* address? Most Jews have never heard of a Jewish holiday called *Yoma*.

In fact, *Yoma* addresses the holiest day of the year, the day that most Jews come to synagogue. The tractate of *Yoma* covers the holy day of Yom Kippur.

What does the word “*Yoma*” mean? *Yoma* means “the day.” And the question we are moved to ask is: Why?

4. The Maharsha’s Explanation

Indeed, this is the very question asked by the great 16th century Talmudic genius, Rabbi Shmuel Eliezer HaLevi Eidels, better known as the Maharsha, in the very beginning of his commentary to the tractate *Yoma*. And he answers as follows:

Yom Kippur is called *Yoma*, “the day” because it is one singular day of pure holiness in the year.

He goes on to explain that the tractate *Yoma* begins with the words *shivat yomim*, “seven days”⁵ because of the holiness the number “seven”

⁵ This works beautifully with the first Tosafot in *Yoma* (*Shivat Yomim*), which discusses that sometimes the Talmud begins with the number (*Shivat yomim* here, *arba avot nezikin* in *Bava Kama*) and sometimes with the subject (*Ha’isha niknit b’shlosha* in *Kidushin*). It could have read, *mafrishin kohen gadol shivat yomim kodem Yom HaKippurim*. The fact the tractate begins with *shivat yomim kodem Yom HaKippurim mafrishin kohen gadol*, places the emphasis on the number seven.

implies. The holiness of this day is in the category of “seven,” like the holiness of the seventh day of the week – Shabbat. And Yom Kippur is called *Shabbat Shabbaton*, whereas the other festivals are merely called *Shabbaton*.⁶

This is why G-d gave us six days of festivals (as they are celebrated in Israel) – Shavuot, Rosh Hashanah, two days of Sukkot, and two days of Passover. These six festival days, on which we may carry, cook, eat, and drink (indeed it is a mitzvah to do so), are related to the six days of the week, which are work-related. But then G-d gave us a seventh day, Yom Kippur, which is analogous to the seventh day, Shabbat, where we do not cook or carry.

Yet, even that is only an analogy, because on Yom Kippur the holiness is even deeper. In addition to not cooking or carrying, on Yom Kippur we don't even eat or drink!

Moreover, so holy is Yom Kippur that it is comparable to the World to Come, where we do not eat or drink, for our entire sustenance is the divine.⁷

This, continues the Maharsha, is revealed in a Talmudic wordplay: *HaSatan*, “the Satan,” has the numerical value of 364, one less than 365 days in the annual solar calendar. Says the Talmud,⁸ this means that Satan has a say in 364 days of the year, but one day of the year is above his shenanigans. That day is *Yoma* – Yom Kippur. On Yom Kippur there is no Satan, there is no evil. Yom Kippur is one with its Maker and is therefore called “the day.”

The Day. The ultimate day.

5. The Essential Day

Maimonides writes with regard to Yom Kippur that “the essence of the day forgives.”⁹

⁶ See Rashi to Exodus 31:15 and to Yoma 74a (“Shabbaton”). Ohr HaTorah Behar on the verse Shabbat Shabbaton.

⁷ Berachot 17a.

⁸ Nedarim 32a.

⁹ Rambam, Hilchot Teshuvah 1:3-4. Shavuot 13a and Tosafot “D’ovad Samach – cf. Yuma 85b. Torat Kohanim, Vayikra 16:30.

This is an extensive discussion among the rabbis whether one has to actually repent on Yom Kippur or whether the day itself, irrespective of our actions, atones for any wrongdoing. This discussion is beyond the scope of this sermon. However, there is a general agreement that, as Maimonides says, “the essence of the day forgives.” And the only thing that matters is how we will reveal the essence of the day.¹⁰

The mystics¹¹ explain that on Yom Kippur we access the most singular oneness of the soul, the core of our very existence, called *yechida*. This is derived from the Torah verses describing Yom Kippur as *achat ba’shana*,¹² meaning “once a year.” The seminal point and penultimate crux of Yom Kippur, is *achat*, meaning “once” – a singular oneness.

This “one day” – “the day” of Yom Kippur – touches the *yechida*, “oneness,” the deepest part of every soul, the quintessential oneness of our soul’s essence. The holiest and purest day of the year reveals the holiest and purest part of our souls – which transcends all the diverse (and fragmented) parts of our lives. *Yechida* is that place within us which unites all of who we are in one singular connection with the divine and our divine purpose on earth.

6. One Day – Forever

This is what the Maharsha is teaching us in his brilliant multilayered answer:

- The secret to the entire Yom Kippur is in *Yoma*, in the fact that there is one day and only one day of pure holiness in the year. The oneness of this day is not about the quantitative number of it being merely one day, in contrast to many days. It’s about its quality – a day of oneness, a singularly unique day, which brings to life the unique oneness in each one of us.

Yom Kippur is one day – but it is THE day (with a capital T) – the day that reveals eternity in our lives. Eternity in a day. One day – forever.

¹⁰See Likkutei Sichot vol. 4, pp. 1149. Vol. 27, pp. 125. Vol. 29, p. 203. p. 329.

¹¹See Likkutei Torah, end of Pinchat. Also see Tosafot “Ad Achat” – Menachot 18a.

¹²Exodus 30:10, with Rashi. Leviticus 16:30.

- To help explain this teaching, the Maharsha gives a very familiar example: Shabbat.

Shabbat is a day of focus. Six days a week we work and are immersed in the fragmented world of materialism. We are invested in the means. Once a week we rest and focus on the ends: on the central spiritual purpose of our lives and all our diverse activities – to create divine home in this material world, through sanctifying the material. Shabbat is a day when we focus on the oneness of our purpose – on the one G-d, on our one soul, on our one home and family.

The same and even more so is true for Yom Kippur, the Shabbat of all Sabbaths. Whatever Shabbat is to the weekdays Yom Kippur is to Shabbat.

Every seventh day for fifty two weeks a year Shabbat reminds us about the purpose of each respective workweek. Thus, Shabbat is a day of festive food and drink, to elevate the food and drink and material involvements of each week.

Once a year – *achat ba'shana* – The one Day Yom Kippur reminds us of the purpose of the entire year, including Shabbat itself. The holiest day of the year, when we refrain from food and drink, gives us a “taste” of the World to Come, which will totally transcend the material world (“in the world to come there will be no eating or drinking”) – utter transcendence and holiness, *yechida* connected with *yachid*, the Oneness of the Divine Essence.

- So much so that even in this physical world, a world of satanic challenges and satanic cynicism, on Yom Kippur, that one day, the Satan, Mr. 364, does not have dominion.

7. When One Day Changed Everything (Story)

So my dear friends. We have entered the holiest day of the year – a day that can change your life forever. And we gather here tonight and tomorrow to tap into this singular potent day – The Day (*Yoma*) – and make sure that it does indeed leave an eternal mark on our lives.

Never for one moment think that achieving great things requires months or years. Yom Kippur teaches us that one day -- yes, just one single day -- can change everything.

But it requires that we pay attention. That we focus. That we don't get distracted and we utilize this powerful day to its fullest.

I want to share with you a story that can inspire us all in this spirit.

Mark was walking home from school one day when he noticed the boy ahead of him had tripped and dropped all of the books he was carrying, along with two sweaters, a baseball bat, a glove and a small tape recorder. Mark knelt down and helped the boy pick up the scattered articles. Since they were going the same way, he helped to carry part of the burden.

As they walked Mark discovered the boy's name was Bill, that he loved video games, baseball and history, and that he was having lots of trouble with his other subjects, and that he had just broken up with his girlfriend. They arrived at Bill's home first, and Mark was invited in for a Coke and to watch some television. The afternoon passed pleasantly with a few laughs and some shared small talk, then Mark went home.

They continued to see each other around school, had lunch together once or twice, then both graduated from junior high school. They ended up in the same high school where they had brief contacts over the years. Finally the long awaited senior year came and three weeks before graduation, Bill asked Mark if they could talk.

Bill reminded him of the day years ago when they had first met. "Did you ever wonder why I was carrying so many things home that day?" asked Bill. "You see, I cleaned out my locker because I didn't want to leave a mess for anyone else. I had stored away some of my mother's sleeping pills, and I was going home to commit suicide. But after we spent some time together talking and laughing, I realized that if I had killed myself, I would have missed that time and so many others that might follow. So you see, Mark, when you picked up those books that day, you did a lot more, you saved my life."¹³

¹³ "A Simple Gesture" by John W. Schlatter; <http://www.chickensoup.com/book-story/36173/a-simple-gesture>

Yoma, it takes but one day, but once a year, but one simple act, to reveal the humanity in us all.

We don't need eons to impact someone's life. We need focus, care and attention. One focused act can accomplish far more than thousands of unfocused acts. One focused day can achieve infinitely more than hundreds of unfocused years.

Remember: "Sometimes one day changes everything; sometimes years change nothing."

Yom Kippur - *Yoma* - inspires us to appreciate the impact our actions on one day could have on lives.

8. The One Star Fish (Story)

A young man was walking along the ocean and saw a beach on which thousands and thousands of starfish have washed ashore. Further along he saw an old man, walking slowly and stooping often, picking up one starfish after another and tossing each one gently into the ocean.

"Why are you throwing starfish into the ocean?" the young man asked.

"Because the sun is up and the tide is going out and if I don't throw them further in they will dry up and die."

"But, old man, don't you realize there are miles and miles of beach and starfish all along it! You can't possibly save them all, you can't even save one-tenth of them. In fact, even if you work all day, your efforts won't make any difference at all."

The old man listened calmly and then bent down to pick up another starfish and threw it into the sea. "It made a difference to that one."

9. Perfect Moment (Conclusion)

We often get caught up in having a perfect year. We want to have a perfect year so badly that we forget to have a perfect day. We spend so much time worrying how to make the whole year better that, in the process, we jeopardize the moment we are in.

Yom Kippur teaches us something so obvious that we often forget it: life is all about one day. One day at a time. We often think about saving the whole planet, but it's really only about being nice to the person next to us. We often try to shoot for the stars, but it's really only about the star you hold in your hand at any given moment.

Remembering that changes everything.

And that is the holiest thing we can do.

Rosh Hashanah, the "Head of the Year," which is intrinsically connected to creation, to the world, to time and space, is about the year. Yom Kippur, "the Day of Atonement," is removed from creation, from time and space, there is no food, drink, there isn't even any evil on this day, and it's all about today, this day, the next 25 hours.

Yom Kippur is not about thinking about the year, it is about thinking about the day.

For the next 25 hours, I don't want you to think in plural, I want you to think in singular. One moment, one second, one minute, one hour, one day at a time. One soul, one friend, one idea, one change at a time.

For the next 25 hours, forget the whole universe and remember only the One G-d.

For the next 25 hours, forget every day that ever was in the past and every day that will be in the future and meditate only on today, here, now.

On this "day," *Yoma*, this "once a year," *achat ba'shana*, I want you to close your eyes and block out everything, block out food, drink ... take this one day and own it. And ask yourself what would your life look like with everything removed. What if there was no evil, no challenges, no commitments, no binds, what would the next 25 hours look like.

Make those 25 hours pure, white, holy – one day, once a year.

Come, you and I together, let us do Yom Kippur like Yom Kippur has never been done before.

As we begin *Kol Nidrei* together as one people, with one soul, with One G-d may we break out into one big smile for we know that with our oneness we have already prevailed.

May we all be written and sealed in the Book of Life.

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