



HIGH HOLIDAYS

Kol Nidrei

The Most Unforgivable Sin

September 29, 2017

THE MOST UNFORGIVEABLE SIN: NOT BELIEVING IN YOURSELF

ABSTRACT

What is the most unforgivable sin?

Many would answer: Not believing in G-d. Because without faith in a higher power that created us, life has no purpose and direction, and we lose our accountability and morality.

The truth is that the most unforgivable sin is not believing in yourself! And Yom Kippur teaches us why.

Yom Kippur is the holiest day of the year because it brought forgiveness and hope into the world. After the Jewish people utterly betrayed G-d by building a Golden Calf, Moses broke the first tablets he received from G-d, and went back up Mt. Sinai and spent 80 (two sets of 40) days beseeching G-d to forgive the people. Finally, on Yom Kippur G-d granted his request and Moses returned on that day with the second tablets and atonement for the Jews.

That is why, on Yom Kippur eve, right after Kol Nidrei, we declare these stirring words three times: Vayomer Hashem Solachti Kidvorecha – And the Lord said: I have pardoned in accordance with your words.

But wait! Upon inspection we find that those words pardoning the Jews were not said in relation to the sin of the Golden Calf. They were said in connection with a completely different transgression – the grave sin of the spies, Chet Hameraglim, who incited the Jews against entering the Promised Land.

Why then would we proclaim on Yom Kippur night the atonement for a sin that has no connection with this Holy Day, when we were forgiven for the Golden Calf?!

The answer to this question, poignantly illustrated with a few amusing anecdotes, illuminates for us a lesser known Yom Kippur message: The secret of self-confidence.

Yom Kippur teaches us that the ultimate belief in G-d and G-d's forgiveness is also learning to believe in yourself.

1. Opening: Kol Nidrei Blessing

Yom Kippur literally means the “Day of Atonement.” We are about to enter the holiest time of the year. We are about to embark on a 25-hour journey of returning to who we truly are – atonement = at-one-meant – repairing any internal breaks, asking for (gaining) forgiveness for any wrongs we may have done, and forgiving any wrongs done to us.

As is customary, I would like to bless each of one you, and all of us and the entire world: may G-d shine His countenance upon each one of you and all of us, and bless us all with health, happiness, prosperity and success, both physically and spiritually.

May this coming year be one of only revealed good and joy, and a goodness and joy than only grows. And may our challenges be transformed into growth opportunities.

May we and all of Israel be written and sealed in the Book of Life, and may we use that gift of life to fulfill our individual and collective mission in making this world a true home for G-d. Amen.

2. Praying for Forgiveness

In just a few moments we will open the ark and remove the Torah scrolls to chant the haunting and hallowed Kol Nidrei prayer. Kol Nidrei removes all the bonds that bind us and unties all the knots that confine us.

Immediately after Kol Nidrei, the cantor will recite a verse three times, followed by us repeating that same verse three times together.

And may the entire congregation of the children of Israel, as well as the proselyte who dwells among them, be forgiven, for all the people acted unwittingly.¹

Then the cantor will recite the verse:

Pardon, I beseech You, the wrongdoing of this people, in keeping with the greatness of Your kindness and as You have forgiven this people from Egypt until now.² And there it is stated:

After which the entire congregation will recite four stirring words three times:

Vayomer Hashem Solachti Kidvorecha – And the Lord said: I have pardoned in accordance with your words.³

Yom Kippur is the Day of Atonement because on this day G-d forgave the people of Israel for their transgression. Yom Kippur opened up a new door – it introduced for the first time the power of forgiveness, allowing and enabling people, for all time, to overcome mistakes. Yom Kippur is therefore the holiest day of the year because it brought forgiveness and hope into the world.

What was the transgression that G-d forgave on Yom Kippur? The sin of the Golden Calf.

¹ Numbers 15:26.

² Numbers 14:19.

³ Numbers 14:20.

Forty days after the G-d uttered the Ten Commandments at Mount Sinai, Moses comes down from the mountain with the Two Tablets in his hand. And he sees an appalling scene: the people have built an idol, a calf made of gold. In an act of total betrayal of G-d they defied the very second commandment “You shall have no other gods before Me. You shall not make for yourself a graven image... You shall not bow down to them, nor serve them.”⁴

When Moses sees this unfaithfulness he shatters the tablets. G-d declares that His relationship with the Jewish people is over. This happened on the 17th of Tammuz, 40 days from the revelation at Sinai.⁵

Moses goes back up the mountain for forty more days to pray for forgiveness on behalf of Israel. But G-d refuses his request. No, I will not forgive the people for their treacherous act. However Moses does not accept G-d’s rejection. He climbs back up the mountain on Rosh Chodesh Elul, and spends another forty days there beseeching G-d to forgive the people.

Finally, forty days later, on this day, on Yom Kippur G-d gives Moses the second set of tablets and grants his request and forgives the people. Moses comes down the mountain, informing the Jews that they are forgiven for the sin of the Golden Calf.

And this is what we recollect and reenact on Yom Kippur eve when we declare: *Vayomer Hashem Solachti Kidvorecha – And the Lord said: I have pardoned in accordance with your words.*

3. The Back-story: Spies

But wait! Upon inspection we find that these words, *Vayomer Hashem Solachti Kidvorecha*, pardoning the Jews were not said in relation to the sin of the Golden Calf. They were said in connection with a completely different transgression – the grave sin of the spies, *Chet Ha’Meraglim*, who incited the Jews against entering the Promised Land.

Why then would we proclaim on Yom Kippur night – in this central prayer – the atonement for a sin that has no connection with this Holy Day, when we were forgiven for the Golden Calf?!

⁴ Exodus 20:3-5.

⁵ See Rashi to Exodus 33:19 from Tanchuma 31 and Seder Olam ch. 6, chronicling the timeline from Shavuot to Yom Kippur.

4. The Deeper Story

To understand this, let us take a deeper look into the sin of the spies.

Their story is told in the Torah portion of Shelach:

As the Jewish people are traveling toward the Promised Land, Moses sends twelve spies to scout the land, which was then called the Land of Canaan, to figure out the best ways to make it easier to enter and conquer the land.

The scouts return with a terrible report, claiming that the land is too difficult to conquer. *The people who inhabit the land are mighty, and the cities are extremely huge and fortified, there we saw the giants. We are unable to go up against the people, for they are stronger than we... [it] is a land that consumes its inhabitants.*⁶

Only two of the twelve scouts, Caleb and Joshua, defend the land and argue that *the land we passed through to scout is an exceedingly good land. We can surely go up and take possession of it, for we can indeed overcome it.*⁷

However the bad report of the other scouts did its damage. The people begin to wail, bemoaning their plight in the desert: *The entire community raised their voices and shouted, and the people wept on that night. All the children of Israel complained against Moses and Aaron, and the entire congregation said, "If only we had died in the land of Egypt, or if only we had died in this desert. Why does the Lord bring us to this land to fall by the sword; our wives and children will be as spoils. Is it not better for us to return to Egypt?" They said to each other, "Let us appoint a leader and return to Egypt!"*⁸

When Joshua and Caleb praised the land and how surely G-d who promised us this land is with us and we can certainly enter it, *the entire congregation threatened to pelt them with stones, but the glory of the Lord appeared in the Tent of Meeting to all the children of Israel.*⁹

Picture the scene: Several hundred years had passed since G-d promised the Holy Land to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, promising them that their children would enter this land. After centuries of waiting for the fulfillment of this promise, after 210 years of suffering under the Egyptians, the people of Israel are finally poised to enter the Promised Land of Israel. Suddenly, on this fateful night, they lost faith in G-d, lost faith in G-d's promises, lost faith in their ability to enter the land of Israel, and begin threatening to stone those that say we can enter.

It's utterly surreal. After all that the children of Israel endured, how could they so abruptly lose all their confidence in G-d and G-d's promises?!

⁶ Numbers 13:28-33.

⁷ Numbers 14:7. 13:30.

⁸ Numbers 14:1-4.

⁹ Numbers 14:10.

Imagine what G-d must have been thinking. Well, the Torah tells us:

*The Lord said to Moses, ‘How long will this people provoke Me? How much longer will they not believe in Me after all the signs I have performed in their midst? I will strike them with a plague and annihilate them; then I will make you into a nation, greater and stronger than they.’*¹⁰

But Moses prays for the people and advocates to change G-d’s mind: *Moses said to the Lord, ‘But the Egyptians will hear that You have brought this nation out from its midst with great power. They will say about the inhabitants of this land, who have heard that You, O Lord, are in the midst of this people; that You, the Lord, appear to them eye to eye and that Your cloud rests over them. And You go before them with a pillar of cloud by day and with a pillar of fire by night, and if You kill this nation like one man, the nations who have heard of Your reputation will say as follows: ‘Since the Lord lacked the ability to bring this nation to the Land which He swore to them, He slaughtered them in the desert.’*

*Now, please, let the strength of the Lord be increased, as You spoke, saying. ‘The Lord is slow to anger and abundantly kind, forgiving iniquity and transgression, Who cleanses [some] and does not cleanse [others], Who visits the iniquities of parents on children, even to the third and fourth generations.’ Please forgive the iniquity of this nation in accordance with your abounding kindness, as You have borne this people from Egypt until now.’*¹¹

When G-d hears Moses’ heartfelt plea, G-d relents: *Vayomer Hashem Solachti Kidvorecha – And the Lord said: I have pardoned in accordance with your words.*

5. Lack of Confidence

What exactly was the sin of the spies and of the people who followed their lead in rejecting the Promised Land? And why was it such a grave sin, causing G-d to consider slaughtering His chosen people in the wilderness?!

After all, didn’t the spies do exactly what they were sent to do – scout out the land and return back with an accurate report of what they witnessed? True, their report was a negative one; but that was what they saw, and therefore that was what they faithfully reported! So why was their behavior considered a sin, and not just a small sin, but a major one?!

Their sin was not the report they delivered. It was the conclusion that they came to – that we *cannot* enter this land. They were sent just to figure how to enter the Promised Land, not whether we can or cannot.

¹⁰ Numbers 14:11-12.

¹¹ Numbers 14:13-19.

Their grave sin was that they chose – and incited the entire nation – to overrule and defy G-d’s promise and command. G-d had promised the land to the Jewish people, and promised them that they would be able to enter, conquer and settle the land. G-d essentially empowered – and instilled into – the people with absolute self-confidence that they could conquer the land despite any challenges facing them.

The terrible sin was that their loss of this confidence! That is the gravest sin of them all. Because without confidence all your strengths and blessings become ineffective.

It was not just their lack of faith in G-d; it was their lack of faith in G-d’s belief in us, in His vote of confidence in us, in His empowering us with all the resources we need in life to face and overcome any challenge that may come our way.

How can G-d forgive us – or better said: how can His forgiveness help us – when we stop believing in our G-d given blessings and strengths?

G-d can forgive us for a sin against G-d. But how can He forgive us when we become our own worst enemy and cease to believe in G-d’s confidence in us, which includes His forgiving us?!

6. The Power of Confidence

Now that we understand the grave sin of the spies, that is was due to their loss of their divine given confidence, we will be able to explain why their pardon is the verse declared tonight, Yom Kippur eve, to open up the entire service on this holiest day of the year: *Vayomer Hashem Solachti Kidvorecha – And the Lord said: I have pardoned in accordance with your words.*¹²

Because Yom Kippur is not just about regaining our confidence in G-d and His power of forgiveness, but in regaining and reclaiming confidence – our G-d given confidence – in ourselves.

And that self-confidence is the key to everything. As much as G-d blesses and gives us, without self-confidence we can do little with those blessings.

In the very words of the scouts: *In our eyes, we seemed like grasshoppers, and so we were in their eyes.*¹³ The problem was not the objective reality; the problem was the scouts lack of confidence in themselves. They looked at themselves like grasshoppers. *In our eyes, we seemed like grasshoppers.* They projected a low self-image, so that impacted how they were seen by others – *so we were in their eyes*

¹² See Likkutei Sichot vol. 23, p. 96ff. Beit Yishai, Egel v’Meraglim.

¹³ Numbers 13:33.

We see this in so many areas in life. Take a tennis champion who gets into a funk and loses confidence in his skills and abilities. Even if he is the number one player in the world, with skills that are superior to every other player, his lack of self-confidence will undermine his ability to win. The key then is not to improve the skills, but rediscovering his belief in himself. A good coach will kick the player “in the pants” and push him to rebuild and regain his confidence.

In *The Art of War* Sun Tzu writes that “every war is won before it is fought.” Psychological fortitude – the absolute confidence and belief that you will be victorious – is the first step to actually win.

Some armies had a custom to sing a victory song before even fighting the first battle. Because that infused confidence in the soldiers that they can and will win. Not unlike the pep-talk and cheers of a sports team before they go out to play.

Two humorous anecdotes capture the power of self-confidence.

7. Story 1: A Coin of Confidence

Long ago, there was a battle about to take place.

One of the generals was talking about tactics with his team of officers.

An officer interrupted him and explained that he thought that the strategy was a waste of time.

“G-d has already decided who will win,” he proclaimed.

“Are you suggesting that fate has decided the result in advance?” the general asked.

“Yes, I am,” the officer responded.

The general took a coin out of his pocket and said, “So if I toss this coin and it comes up heads, we win, but if it’s tails we lose. Is that how fate works?”

“Pretty much.” said the officer.

The general tossed the coin and it came up heads.

“See, G-d has decided. We can’t lose now!”

They went to their troops with the good news and the soldiers marched into battle with renewed enthusiasm.

After a glorious victory, the officers met in the general’s tent to celebrate.

“Do you believe in fate now?” the general was asked.

The leader smiled, reached into his pocket and pulled out the coin to show to the others.

It was heads on both sides.

“Maybe I do, maybe I don’t believe in fate, but either way without the value of self-belief and self-confidence you cannot win the battle. When the soldiers thought that we couldn’t lose, I knew that we couldn’t lose.”

8. Story 2: A Test of Self-Confidence

The professor stood before his class of 30 senior molecular biology students, about to pass out the final exam. “I have been privileged to be your instructor this semester, and I know how hard you have all worked to prepare for this test. I also know most of you are off to medical school or grad school next fall,” he said to them.

“I am well aware of how much pressure you are under to keep your GPAs up, and because I know you are all capable of understanding this material, I am prepared to offer an automatic ‘B’ to anyone who would prefer not to take the final.”

The relief was audible as a number of students jumped up to thank the professor and departed from class. The professor looked at the handful of students who remained, and offered again, “Any other takers? This is your last opportunity.” One more student decided to go.

Seven students remained. The professor closed the door and took attendance. Then he handed out the final exam.

There were two sentences typed on the paper: “Congratulations, you have just received an ‘A’ in this class. Keep believing in yourself.”

9. The Answer: Yom Kippur is Both Belief and Self-Belief

Yom Kippur gave birth to hope and confidence that we can overcome any challenge, vanquish any enemy, endure any difficulty. On this day G-d instilled and instills in us not just the belief in Him and His power to forgive us for our iniquities, but the belief in ourselves – the belief in G-d’s confidence in us.

Building and worshipping the Golden Calf betrayed the faith of the people in G-d. Replacing G-d with a false deity made of gold. A grave sin indeed. But this was a sin against G-d, and this G-d can and did forgive this sin on Yom Kippur.

The sin of the spies took this transgression a step further: It wasn't just a lack of belief in G-d; that lack of belief translated into the people not believing in their very destiny and their very G-d-given ability to achieve that destiny. They didn't just betray G-d; they betrayed themselves, and demonstrated how little they think of themselves.

When G-d tells you that you can and will enter the Promised Land and you say that you cannot and won't, that is both a disbelief in G-d and a disbelief in yourself and the divine image in which you were created, and the divine spark within you that can accomplish anything.¹⁴

Moses knew that beseeching G-d to forgive the people for the Golden Calf was difficult, but relatively straightforward: once the people do Teshuva and return to them appreciating the true understanding of G-d, removed from representation of false idols, then the people could be forgiven and receive the second tablets. They can then return to serving as divine agents created in the divine image to fulfill their calling in this world.

However, the disbelief in your G-d-given abilities (as reflected in the sin of the spies) disempowers your very confidence to use those abilities to conquer the "land."

How can such a sin be forgiven? Forgiveness seemingly could not even help a person who doesn't believe in himself, which includes also not believing in the forgiveness!

By declaring they don't have the strength to enter the Promised Land the scouts – and all the Jews that followed them – in effect surrendered and sealed their own self-defeating fate, not allowing them to enter the Land. If one believes a door is locked then for him the door becomes locked, and that cannot be remedied with prayer or forgiveness alone.

That is actually why the scouts and the Jews in the wilderness did not enter the Promised Land. Only their children would enter. In effect, G-d was doing them a "favor" by not allowing them into the Land.¹⁵ If they would enter Israel and believe that they do not belong there or that they do not have the ability to settle and make the land flourish, then things will be even worse. As a consequence of their disbelief in themselves and G-d's promise, they will die¹⁶ in the desert so they won't have to suffer worse in a promised land they don't believe in.

14 See Kedushat Levi, Shelach.

15 See Likkutei Sichot ibid

16 See Likkutei Sicho ibid for the nuance of the word "slaughter," meaning to draw and elevate, as opposed to kill.

Yet, Moses, the leader of the people, beseeched G-d, not to die all at once in a plague, but rather gradually over forty years, so that the nations of the world won't say that G-d cannot take the people in, or that G-d cannot empower and inspire the people to believe in themselves and want to go in.¹⁷

And G-d granted him this request: *Vayomer Hashem Solachti Kidvorecha – And the Lord said: I have pardoned in accordance with your words.* And though this generation (that left Egypt) will pass away in the desert, Caleb and Joshua (who demonstrated their belief in the promise and in G-d's confidence in them), and all the children of this generation, will enter into the land. They are not troubled by disbelief in themselves and G-d's promise, so they will have the G-given confidence to conquer the land and fulfill its purpose.

10. The Root of Self-Confidence

This explains the connection between Yom Kippur, which forgave for the sin of the Golden Calf, with the pardon for the sin of the spies: *Vayomer Hashem Solachti Kidvorecha – And the Lord said: I have pardoned in accordance with your words:*

Why indeed did the *dor d'eab*, the enlightened generation that left Egypt, not believe that they could go into the land promised them by G-d?

The root of this lapse in faith was the sin of the Golden Calf. The true basis of self-confidence is not in human conceit and pride. It is not founded on self-importance and arrogance. It is rooted in our absolute belief in G-d and that created each one of us in His Divine Image, and by virtue of that inherent birthright each of us has all the resources and abilities to achieve the mission we were charged with in this world. Period.

As everything mortal, human ego and self-importance are ultimately hollow and have no lasting power. Unwavering self-confidence is embedded in our very beings as created in the divine image. As such, we have G-d's confidence in us to accomplish even the insurmountable.

When people begin to define G-d in their own corporeal image, instead of seeing themselves as created in the divine image, then they can begin to question or "interpret" G-d directives in foreign and dangerous ways. This planted a seed for later disbelieving in their ability to enter the Land and G-d to deliver on His promise.

And this is why on Yom Kippur eve we cry out the divine pardon granted in connection with the sin of the spies, not the Golden Calf:

¹⁷ This explains why indeed Moses didn't advocate for saving the Jews? Why does it seem as if Moses is troubled more by what the Egyptians and the world will say than the actual plague, which would wipe out all of Israel?

True, on Yom Kippur, then and now, G-d is forgiving the people for the sin of the Golden Calf. However, that's only the first half of the story of forgiveness. For G-d to forgive us for a sin against G-d is relatively easy.

The second half of the story is far harder: Forgiving us for not believing in ourselves – for not believing in G-d's confidence in us.

Not believing in G-d, is forgivable; but not believing in yourself, is unforgivable.

But Yom Kippur pardons us even for this unforgivable sin – for our own lack of G-d-based self-confidence. It remind and infuses us with the promise and blessing that we can conquer, sanctify and transform this material world and turn it into a Divine home.

11. Conclusion: Believing in G-d is Believing in Yourself

On Yom Kippur we pray for G-d to forgive us and give us the second tablets. But it is also the day we forgive ourselves for not believing, even for one second, in our innate, G-d-given ability to accomplish our life mission; to enter into the Promised Land.

Yom Kippur restores G-d's tablets. And Yom Kippur restores our self-confidence.

Not believing in G-d is remedied through supplication and prayer and atonement. But not believing in yourself is only remedied by believing that G-d believes in in you.

Yom Kippur is about believing in G-d, in melting down the Golden Calf, and repairing the broken tablets and receiving the new ones.

But Yom Kippur is also about believing in ourselves and entering the Promised Land.

And both are intrinsically corrected and interdependent. If you don't believe in G-d (or create a false god) you won't believe in yourself and your abilities. If you don't believe in your abilities you are actually challenging your very belief in G-d who gave and gives you those abilities.

As we enter into the holiest day, we all must remember that we carry a coin that has heads on both sides. We can only win. And when one can only win, one confidently enters the Promised Land already a winner.

Gut Yom Tov and Gut Shabbos!

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